

AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

An Awfully Big Adventure

BY

"BARTIMEUS" *presented.*

Some of the best of the best



CASSELL AND COMPANY, LTD
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne

First published 1919

TO MR. D.
AND MRS. D.

961
R491
aw

To
A. R. S.

428492

NOTE

The sketch entitled " Unto the Hills " appeared originally in Blackwood's Magazine, and is included in this book with the Editor's kind permission.

PREFACE

It was my original intention to gather this miscellaneous assortment of war sketches and stories together under the heading of "A Scran Bag."

The aptness of this title will be apparent when it is explained that odds and ends of personal possessions left lying about the mess decks of a man-of-war are impounded by the Ship's Police and kept for safe custody in a sack. This receptacle of random gleanings is called the Scran Bag.

My publishers agreed that the title was admirable—to the initiated. They opined, however, that the bulk of the public would be left, so to speak, cold. They reminded me that it was no use explaining it in a Preface, since no one reads Prefaces. They intimated that life was a sordid business, and we all have to make our livings—in short, no book with such a title would sell.

I therefore turned to the classics, and in "Peter Pan" found a title which, I think, is comprehensive of any record, however fragmentary and incomplete, whether bald fact or fact sugared with fiction, of the Navy's share in this War.

“To die,” said Peter Pan, “would be an awfully big adventure.” It may be so; but, unhappily, the lips of the adventurer are sealed, and we are left theorising, none the wiser.

To wake up in the morning is a better thing than dying, for all the poets may say; and if the day holds, as this book does, somewhat of love, war in a righteous cause, and victory at its close, may not it, too, be called An Awfully Big Adventure?

CONTENTS

I

An Awfully Big Adventure.

PAGE

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1. THE WOOING OF MOULDY JAKES | I |
| 2. THE NARRATIVE OF COMMANDER WILLIAM
DALRYMPLE HORNBY, ROYAL NAVY | 57 |

II

Behind the Veil : The Story of the Q Boats. (1918)

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. FIRST BLOOD | 124 |
| 2. ORDEAL BY FIRE | 132 |
| 3. WON BY WAITING | 141 |
| 4. THE SPLENDID FAILURE | 147 |

III

"Not in the Presence of the Enemy." (1918)

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. THE GLEANER | 157 |
| 2. THE MILLIONTH CHANCE | 163 |
| 3. CHINKS | 169 |
| 4. A FORTY-FOOT SETTING | 174 |

IV

The Action between H.M.S. *Prize* and German

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Submarine U 93 | 180 |
|--------------------------|-----|

Contents

V

The Forfeit (1916)	PAGE 189
------------------------------	-------------

VI

Supper Beer (1914)	201
------------------------------	-----

VII

The Way They Have (1915)	215
------------------------------------	-----

VIII

The Epitaph	231
-----------------------	-----

IX

The English Way (1917)	244
----------------------------------	-----

X

The Parting of the Ways (1919)	259
--	-----

XI

Unto the Hills (1913)	264
---------------------------------	-----

AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

PART ONE

THE WOOING OF MOULDY JAKES

I

THE late afternoon sunlight was slanting across the heather when the "Mantis" came puffing round a bend of the river.

Contrary to the established custom and traditions of British men-of-war, her crew maintained a breathless and high-spirited dialogue with the Captain, who seasoned it with shrill invective directed at a routed enemy, invisible and presumed to be in full flight amid the bracken.

At the bend alluded to, the Captain of the "Mantis" turned and shouted encouragement to the "Moth," who, some hundred yards astern, was negotiating some rapids and presumably under heavy fire.

"I say, *do* buck up!" he cried. "The Turks are retreating like anything!"

"I can't buck up," wailed the Captain, officers and

2 An Awfully Big Adventure

ship's company of the "Moth." "There's a bramble all caught up in my petticoat."

"Take the beastly thing off then," commanded the Senior Officer, and turned to con his ship through the tortuous shallows of the Upper Reaches.

The fir-clad and boulder-strewn slopes of the valley had given place to the open moor, where the stream abandoned its headlong course and broadened into wide pools and shelving beaches of gravel strewn with bleached twigs.

The "Tarantula" was discernible still among the cataracts, while in the far distance the Main Army clambered deftly from boulder to boulder and fended off the onslaughts of flies with a frond of bracken.

Although the fire of the enemy had perceptibly slackened, the casualties aboard the "Mantis" mounted steadily. Three times the Commanding Officer quitted his ship to wallow in his gore on the springy turf, only returning on each occasion to find the Quartermaster on his knees in the shallows, delivering valedictory rhetoric at his post as his life's blood ebbed.

The barred and speckled trout fled up-stream like bronze flashes as the irresistible advance continued. The shrill bark of the "Mantis's" gun searched the hollows and peat bogs for the possibly lurking rear-guard of the rout, and sent the shy kingfisher darting ahead of the bedraggled white ensign in the van of the pursuit.

Finally the "Mantis" dropped anchor from sheer lack of breath and prepared to disembark a landing

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 3

party. Her Captain, carrying the ensign and armed to the teeth, climbed on to a lichen-scarred boulder in quest of the remainder of the Naval Forces.

"*Come on!*" he shouted, and the sound of his voice was swallowed by the vast solitude of the moor.

The "Moth" had forsaken the waterways and from discreet glimpses afforded by a furze bush bordering the stream was proceeding in execution of previous orders.

The "Tarantula"—it was useless to disguise the inglorious fact—was engaged in picking blackberries and sharing them with the Main Army. Far out of reach of hail or reproach, the advance guard of that historic force, hitherto invisible, was alone unquenched in spirit and energy, and rushed to and fro with wagging tail among the bewildering blend of scents left by the passage of rabbit, vole and otter.

The Captain of the "Mantis" permitted his nostril to curl contemptuously.

"*Pouf!*" he said, and added—for the benefit of the officers and men of the landing party, desperadoes all—"what *can* you expect from girls?"

His fellow-desperadoes, presumably from motives of chivalry or disgust, vouched no reply, and their leader turned to sweep the path of the retreat through a pair of mother-of-pearl opera glasses, suspended from his neck by a piece of string. Then instinctively, like a wild animal surprised, all the supple grace of his young body stiffened tense and rigid. Not

4 An Awfully Big Adventure

fifty yards up-stream sat a man nursing a rifle across his knees.

He was a youngish man, clean-shaven, and he sat, apparently deep in thought, puffing a pipe. Not even the tumult of the advance upon Bagdad appeared to have disturbed his reflections, for he had not turned his head.

The Senior Officer of the Naval Forces lowered his mother-of-pearl opera glasses and scrutinised the stranger with his unimpeded vision for nearly a minute. Finally, casting a glance down-stream, he clambered from his place of vantage and advanced.

The boy was about ten paces distant when the stranger turned his head. He was of a lean, rather lantern-jawed cast of countenance, and his reddish-brown eyes showed not the faintest surprise or curiosity at being suddenly confronted by a small sunburnt boy, bare-legged and dripping wet, who wore a brass-hilted sword bayonet (relic of the Franco-Prussian war), cutlass-wise, a leather pistol holster (empty), a soda-water bottle, a bandolier made of corks, and the aforementioned opera glasses all distributed about his person, and who carried a white ensign on an ash-plant.

"'Evening," said the stranger; the safety catch of his rifle went over with a little click.

The boy stood perfectly still, and there was a moment's silence. Then, planting the flagstaff in the sandy margin of the stream, he came closer.

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 5

"What's your name?" he inquired.

"Jakes," replied the seated figure. He removed his pipe from between his teeth and blew meditatively into the bowl, contemplating the tendril of smoke issuing from the mouthpiece with the air of an alchemist preoccupied with a phenomenon.

"Graeme Jakes," he added in a lower tone, as if speaking to himself. "Sometimes called 'Mouldy.'"

"Mine's Cornelius James Halliday," volunteered the boy. Whatever he read in the stranger's face apparently banished the lurking fear of ridicule from his sensitive and imaginative heart. "I'm the 'Mantis,' you know," he continued, "coming up the river to Bagdad. The 'Moth' and 'Tarantula' are away back in there——" He jerked his hand towards the bend in the stream as if the gesture made the explanation quite clear and sufficing.

The man evinced no apparent surprise at the information; he replaced his pipe between his teeth, took a couple of deep puffs at it and nodded gravely:

"What about the Army?" he asked.

"Oh, she—it's back there too. Miss Mayne's the Army. She's our governess, and her brother was killed in the retreat from Mons, so we always let her be the Army. He was in the Guards, and she only cried once; she'd be here now only Georgie—Georgina, you know, my sister—made her stop and pick blackberries. Georgina swanks rather nowadays when we have games—she usen't to, but she's getting old. Jane doesn't swank, only she got foul of some

6 An Awfully Big Adventure

brambles, and she's coming on in her knickerbockers when she's got her skirt off."

The dilatory advance of the remainder of the British Expeditionary Force having been satisfactorily explained, Cornelius James sat down and clasped his hands about his small scarred knees. His eyes were drawn and held by the magnetism of the lethal weapon which lay idly upon the man's knees.

"Is that loaded?" he queried.

"Yep."

"What do you shoot with it—mostly—hereabouts?"

From his tone the conversation might have been conducted in a country where tiger predominated among the fauna.

"Rabbits," replied the other, adding after a pause: "sitting." He jerked open the breech of the miniature rifle, picked up the tiny shell that flicked out on to the turf and handed it gravely to his interrogator.

Cornelius James accepted it with equal gravity.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's up with your hand? Why is it all bandaged? Have you been wounded in the war?"

Graeme Jakes surveyed the grubby folds of lint and the maimed fingers of his left hand. For the first time the shadow of a smile played about his mouth.

"Yep. Long time ago. Nothin' much, only it wouldn't heal. Went bad on me. Bit of poison gas shell."

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 7

"Oh," said the boy, and contemplated his new acquaintance with renewed interest.

"Are you Army or Navy?"

The man slid a cartridge into his rifle, closed the bolt and raised the weapon to his shoulder, resting his left elbow on his knee. A sharp report followed the instant's silence; the scut of a rabbit flicked white on the opposite slope and vanished.

"Missed him!" ejaculated the sniper. "Generally do."

He lowered the toy on to his knees again. "Navy," he continued as if nothing had interrupted the conversation.

"Daddy's in the Navy too," exclaimed the boy. "Do you know him?—he's an Admiral."

"Know him by name. Don't bump up against Admirals much."

"I wish I was old enough to be in the Navy," sighed Cornelius James. "It's awful not being able to do anything in this war. Even Miss Mayne is going to do war work soon. She says every woman ought to do something."

"Who—who's Miss Mayne?"

"I told you. Our governess. She's a perfect ripper. She's the third governess we've had. But the other two weren't quite——" Cornelius James hesitated. "Well's matter of fact, I don't think they were quite the right sort. They didn't understand how to play, they hadn't any 'magination, and they were always afraid of cows and getting sunburnt and

8 An Awfully Big Adventure

taking off their shoes and stockings when it came to anything wet. Miss Mayne's quite different—because—well, because she's what she is, I suppose. It makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

Graeme Jakes considered the subtlety in silence.

"I don't know," he said finally. He turned his head and looked at the small snob nursing his bare knees. Again their eyes met in friendly searching scrutiny.

"I've hardly ever met any ladies," he said. It was as if he had taken the boy as an equal into a rather pathetic confidence.

Cornelius James surveyed his new friend with a deliberate interest. It absorbed the frayed deerstalker speckled with trout-flies, the flannel shirt open at the throat, the baggy tweed coat of many pockets, the corduroy breeches and muddy boots and gaiters. To the wearer of these garments he applied in turn all the standards of his brief experience of life.

"Don't they like you?" he asked.

"Dunno," was the reply. "Never asked 'em." He looked musingly across the rolling moor. "One did once—but she died when I was little."

The splashing of water down-stream interrupted the speaker.

"Here's Jane," said Cornelius James, looking over his shoulder. "She's all right," he added, quickly, as the other made a hasty movement that suggested fright. "She's really quite sensible for a girl."

Jane drew near, swinging her broad-brimmed hat

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 9

in her hand and stepping from stone to stone with the lithe grace of a youthful dryad. She had discarded her petticoat and wore only a jersey and knickers.

"Jane," shouted Cornelius James, as she approached. "He's in the Navy, but he doesn't know Daddy." He made a gesture of proprietorship in the direction of the impassive figure seated in the heather.

Jane waded ashore and extended her hand with friendly unconsciousness of self.

"How d'you do?" she said, and devoured him with round grey eyes. "Did you ever know Mr. Standish?" she inquired.

Her brother's protégé nodded smiling. "Bunje?" he said. "Yes, rather—I was shipmates along of 'im."

He lapsed jestingly into the vernacular of the lower deck.

"Jane loves him," interposed Cornelius James. "She was going to marry him only he got married to someone else. She was awfully sick—weren't you, Jane?"

"Shut up," was the graceful retort of the woman scorned. "And did you know Torps—Mr. Mainwaring? He was killed," she added gravely.

"No, never shipmates with him. Heard about him, though. White man by all accounts."

"He was a darling," said Jane, simply. "It's dreadful to think of him dead. But I don't think frightfully nice people *really* die, do you?"

"Don't know any," was the solemn reply.

10 An Awfully Big Adventure

Jane pursed up her mouth and opened her eyes wider. She was standing upright as a lath before him, her hands clasped behind her, and the water still glistened on her slim bare legs.

"Where do you live?" she inquired, compassionately. The stranger jerked his head back across the moor to where the ground rose and the façade of a distant mansion was discernible through a vista in the trees of a great park.

"Over there," he added in amplification.

"Does that house belong to you?" asked Jane all incredulous. She had decided at the first glimpse that this was a homeless tramp of the cleaner and rather nice variety, and from the first had been prepared to take him, metaphorically, to her bosom.

"No," said the tramp. "It's my brother-in-law's place. I stay with him and my step-sister when I'm ashore." He eyed the children in turn. "Where do you live?"

"We live ever so far away," replied Cornelius James. "But we've all had chicken-pox and we've come with Miss Mayne to stay in a farm near here. Glebe Farm it's called. Mummie's up in Scotland——"

"So's to be near Daddy's ship," explained Jane.

"Will you come and have tea with us one day?" added the boy. "You needn't be frightened, 'cos we've stopped peeling and we're out of quarantine. Do you know where Glebe Farm is?"

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 11

The other nodded. "Belongs to my brother-in-law," he said. His eyes as he spoke were on the lower reaches of the river. Then abruptly he rose to his feet. "Now I must be off," he said. "Awfully important engagement."

At the bend of the river Miss Mayne and Georgina stood shading their eyes from the sun.

"Oh, don't go!" chorused Jane and her brother. "You haven't talked to Miss Mayne yet," added Cornelius James—"or Georgina. She'll run after you when she knows you're in the Navy, so it's no use going yet—Hallo!" He broke off and stared downstream. "Now where's Miss Mayne off to?"

"Gone to put her stockings on," explained Jane, with the mysterious comprehension of sex. "She's shy."

"Pouf!" snorted Cornelius James. "Miss Mayne shy!"

"Must be off," muttered Mr. Jakes with a swift glance at the far-off clump of gorse that concealed Miss Mayne and her modesty. "Just remembered most important engagement——" He extended his hand to each of his small acquaintances, and, turning abruptly, made off across the moor with his shadow stalking jerkily ahead of him.

"Nice man!" was Jane's emphatic conviction.

Cornelius James eyed his sister with suspicion.

"Now look here, Jane," he said, "I found this man. Just remember that. You bagged the shepherd in the little house on wheels, an' that boy who could

12 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

imitate a bullfinch, and the man with the wooden leg at the level crossing. I found them first and I found this man first. He's mine."

"Here's Miss Mayne," replied his sister.

2

Graeme Jakes found his step-sister in the hall on his return. He laid his rifle down, and, crossing over to the fireplace, stood eyeing her with his back to the empty hearth.

The evening post had been brought in and the surface of the sofa not occupied by the lady's angular form was strewn with opened envelopes, charitable appeals, receipted bills, and a sprinkling of letters. Lady Manners was a woman approaching forty, clad in garments of aggressively country cut, and about her obtrusively brogued feet a collection of dachshunds squirmed and writhed.

She looked up from her correspondence and scrutinised her brother through tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles.

"Where have you been all the afternoon?" she inquired. "The Smedleys were over to tea."

"Those people who bought The Garth?"

"Yes. Mrs. Smedley brought her two girls expressly to renew their acquaintance with you. And you—you vanish!"

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 13

Lady Manners picked up another envelope and slit it open with an action somehow suggestive of a hard-pressed fishmonger gutting herrings.

"I've had some," was the reply.

"Had what—tea?"

"No, Mrs. Smedley's girls. The Misses Smedley."

"I don't know that I quite follow you, Graeme. Do you mind not knocking out your pipe on the clean hearth?"

The individual addressed ignored the last sentence and thoughtfully rubbed the bowl of his pipe against the side of his sunburnt nose.

"They give me the holy pip," he explained.

"Do they!" said his step-sister icily. "May I ask in what respect they—they fail to meet with your approval? You are fond of complaining that you never meet any nice girls—that your life in the Navy restricts you to the companionship of your own sex; with an alternative the reverse of desirable. I place opportunities in your way of becoming acquainted with the young people of the County and you behave with rudeness to them, and to me, if you'll let me say so. Josephine and Alicia Smedley are both war-workers, and you should have much in common, making all allowances for your—er, peculiar upbringing."

"Thank 'ee," said her step-brother cheerfully. "What particular line of business do they chuck their weights about in?"

14 An Awfully Big Adventure

"They are both taking a holiday, but normally Josephine drives a War Office car——"

"Abnormally, I should say," interposed the soiler of clean hearths. "She's got a laugh like a Klaxon horn. What's t'other been doing in the Great War, Grannie?"

"Alicia? She places her somewhat exceptional talents at the disposal of the wounded soldiers—officers, of course."

"'Course. Don't tell me she nurses 'em?"

"No. Her temperament—sensitive, artistic, *fluid* as it is—is too refined for the horrors of wards and operating theatres; she dances to amuse the poor things when they are convalescing—convalescence is a trying time."

"It is. Did she come over to give a display for my benefit? I'm only a wounded sailor, though. Don't count, I s'pose?"

Lady Manners began to gather her correspondence together.

"Graeme," she said, "I am at a loss to know why you should adopt this tone. If it is intended to be in keeping with a pose which your profession requires of you, I can only say that it ill becomes a guest before this hearth."

There was a genuinely hurt tone in the lady's voice—which, indeed, trembled a little. This note of unconscious pathos moved Graeme to one of his rare attempts at self-revelation. He knew she was fond of him in her preoccupied, hard way, and was more con-

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 15

cerned about his "lone wolf" attitude towards the amenities of civilised life, as she understood them, than she was capable of putting into words.

"Emily," he said, "'t isn't a pose. 'Fore God it's no pose. Call me what you like—intolerant, idealistic, or whatever long word meets my case. Fact remains, I can't stick that type of woman. They shock me, Emily, in the way blasphemy and drunkenness shock you. All my life long—for fifteen years at least—I've lived in ships with men as my sole companions—raucous-voiced, hairy-chested, buck men, my dear; every blessed type; selfish men and unselfish ones, drunkards, bullies, cranks, wise men and fools. 'T isn't that one doesn't like 'em at heart, most of 'em. Some are lovable; but one gets into the way of thinking women must be somehow utterly different. When I went to sea I thought all women in the world must be like what I could remember of Mother—" unconsciously his voice changed. "I went on thinking so for some years, chiefly because I never met any women to speak to. The more I saw of men the more I felt convinced that women must be wonderful . . . their voices . . ."

The speaker pulled out a ragged tobacco pouch and slowly fell to filling his pipe.

"'Course, as time went on I met women—of a sort—but they didn't disillusion me. They strengthened my conviction that the—er—other sort must be all I'd dreamed they were. Trouble was I never met any. I haven't any parlour tricks—too shy——"

16 An Awfully Big Adventure

For a few moments the lighting of his pipe occupied the speaker's attention. He enveloped himself in wreaths of smoke.

"I wonder why—I wonder how girls—ladies, I mean, to use an old-fashioned word—get like that Josephine Smedley; flicking cigarette ash about and grimacing when they talk. They don't seem able to say anything without George Robey's slang to help 'em, or to finish a sentence without a laugh like a third-rate barmaid's. I believe subalterns describe them as 'sports.' They aren't men, though they try to ape men; they aren't women—they aren't—oh God! how I hate the type!"

Lady Manners rose. There was in her aristocratic, rather narrow face, a suspicion that her relative had been drinking. Once on a previous visit the idealist had been driven by boredom to seek entertainment in the village tavern, and, while adding considerably to his popularity amongst the rustic toss-pots, returned smelling insufferably of beer.

"Don't go, Emily. Don't shove off for a second. I only get wound up like this once in a blue moon, and I'd better get it off my chest now once and for all. Don't imagine I think these Miss Smedleys represent women war-workers. I know they're a minority, but they represent a type. I know something about the other sort—the ones who've helped us to bash the Hun, and they make me feel like a piffling slacker sometimes. How would you like to stand on your feet for twelve hours a day doing acetylene gas

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 17

welding, or ride eighty miles carrying spare parts on a stink-bike through a snow blizzard—not once, but as a daily routine? I was shipmates with a bloke whose sister did that for two consecutive years. How would you like swabbing out a gangrened wound in a part of a man's anatomy polite civilisation makes him hide under clothes——? Don't raise your eyebrows, Emily! The point I'm driving at is that thousands of women do these things, and somehow manage to remain women——” He mused reminiscently upon a then recent article in *Blackwood's Magazine*—“Even when they pull off their petticoats and put on breeches to plough an acre a day.”

“I am sorry,” said Lady Manners, on the threshold of the hall. “But I quite fail to see the application of all this—this rant.”

“It applies to Josephine Smedley and her kidney,” replied the seeker-after-ideal-womanhood. “It is my ‘statement in mitigation.’ You, my dear Emily, having donned the black cap and condemned me to a tea-party with the lady in question, cannot do less than listen to my views.” Graeme beamed at her irate ladyship, his ill-humour blown away on the winds of vehemence. “And now here is Malcolm bowed down with the affairs of the nation.”

Sir Malcolm Manners, who wore a preoccupied air and carried a sheaf of letters in his hand, entered as Graeme spoke. He was a meagre individual with absent blue eyes and a drooping moustache tinted by nicotine. His thin grey hair was parted unsymmetri-

18 An Awfully Big Adventure

cally down the centre, and one wisp, perpetually overlooked or rebellious against restraint, stuck up from the crown like a cock's tail in miniature.

He stopped when he saw his wife and referred fussily to the letters he carried, as if to refresh his mind from notes preparatory to making a speech.

"We must go up to town for a few days, Emily. These fellows are going to muddle everything without someone on the spot."

By "someone" he meant himself. The baronet was Chairman of a Committee charged with the task of repatriating certain classes of refugees. The refugees having no wish to be repatriated and the Committee boasting not a single business man in its composition, matters were not progressing as rapidly—so said the type-written report in the Chairman's hands—as could be hoped.

"Ha!" said the lady, scenting muddle like a war-horse sniffing battle. There are women who rush to straighten out other people's affairs with a gusto only equalled by the discovery of dust in their own rooms. They make admirable housewives. Then, somehow, into the pleasurable anticipation of good work ahead, of fussy Committee meetings and the rounding up of expostulating unintelligibles, there floated the recollection of Graeme into their minds.

"You don't mind if we run away for a few days, Graeme—you can amuse yourself all right till we come back I dare say? It's a nuisance—but you know what

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 19

these confounded fellows are if you leave them to themselves."

Sir Malcolm brandished the papers in vague admonition of his absent fellow-repatriators.

"Quite," said Graeme, wondering what they were all talking about. Then, perhaps realising that something more was required of him, added: "I'll be quite all right alone. Have no end of a time. Don't either of you hurry back on my account."

"There are no engagements to bring us back till the end of the week, are there Emily?" queried Sir Malcolm.

"Not that I can remember." Lady Manners walked to a bureau and consulted a little tablet of memoranda. "Oh, I had forgotten, I wrote this morning to the governess in charge of those children staying at Glebe Farm, asking her to bring them to tea the day after to-morrow. They are the children of Admiral Halliday; you remember, we met him and his wife at Portsmouth the year before the war—when we stayed with the Farehams."

"Pretty woman, was she?" inquired Sir Malcolm. "Or was it the one who liked boiled eggs with her tea?"

"It's immaterial," said his wife. "The children have had chicken-pox and are convalescing. I understand they are free from infection."

"They've stopped peeling," said the voice of Graeme.

"Eh?" said Sir Malcolm, wheeling with a sur-

20 An Awfully Big Adventure

prised expression. He had a way of forgetting his brother-in-law's presence and being startled when he spoke. "That needn't bring me back from town, need it?"

"Not at all," said Graeme cheerfully. "They'd probably start again if they thought they'd dragged you back."

The baronet looked still more confused. "Start what? I don't understand. What have I got to do with these children and their complaints?"

"Nothing," said his wife, in the tone the keeper of an imbecile might adopt. "They are only coming here to tea when we are away. Graeme, of course, would consider it beneath his dignity to entertain children"—she smiled rather frostily—"so Mrs. Mackworth must give them their tea and show them the picture gallery, and—er—Baines shall take them round the gardens. That will leave Graeme free from all responsibilities in our absence."

"Thank you," said the officer referred to. "Always grateful for small mercies." He looked at his watch, and lounged off towards the stairway. "I'm going to shift for dinner." At the first landing he paused and looked back. "By the way, Emily," he said, "have they accepted?"

"Who?" asked Lady Manners, her head once more full of the affairs of the about-to-be-repatriated.

"Those children."

"No. If a letter comes you had better open it, and let Mrs. Mackworth know if they are coming."

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 21

"I will," said Graeme. "But, oh, who wouldn't sell his little farm and go to sea!"

3

Cornelius James claimed the right to be the bearer of the acceptance to Lady Manners' invitation by virtue of having been the first to discover Graeme.

Georgina, doomed to an hour's violin practice, was immured in the stuffy farm parlour amid waxen fruit, daguerreotype portraits and family Bibles. Jane, after a spirited bid for the post of messenger, sought consolation in the region of the sheep-dip, speedily becoming as excited and almost as wet as the struggling animals themselves. Miss Mayne, having borrowed an iron from the farmer's wife, retired to the sitting-room, where, with pretty brows knit in the preoccupation of *blanchissage*, she was no longer a governess, but a slim priestess before a vestal altar, aloof, mysterious.

Cornelius James, turning his back on these feminine activities, pursued a stony lane that climbed through sloping fields and presently debouched upon the main road. The lodge gates of his destination stood a few hundred yards higher up, but boylike he disdained so formal an entrance, and nosed along the high palisade surrounding the park until a displaced board gave him access.

22 An Awfully Big Adventure

The trees grew thick and untended as in a wilderness, with moss clinging to their bark and the verdure wellnigh shutting out the sky. Underfoot the dead leaves of countless autumns' garnering rustled crisply and, as the boy advanced, twigs snapped at every step; something startled by his footfall bounded away through the fern unseen. To the ears of boyhood, Pan's pipe has not grown dim, and it was with a heart that thumped responsive that Cornelius James crept forward.

His imagination, acutely vivid and rather childish for his years, insisted that this was a desperate business, demanding caution and woodcraft of no mean order. Indians, painted and feathered, slipped like shadows from bole to hollow; a tiny pool amid the bracken was the nightly drinking-place of beasts a hunter of his experience could recognise from their spoor. . . . A squirrel, low down on an overhanging branch, suddenly sent his heart into his mouth as it broke into a scolding chatter at his approach.

The trees grew fewer and gave glimpses of great stretches of lawn, vivid green in the brilliant sunlight. Beyond, entrenched behind flower-beds and a stone balustraded terrace, stood the great house. Had Cornelius James but known it, romance clustered thicker round those hoary buildings than any he could imagine in his woodland transports.

Monks had chanted matins and vespers in the vaulted chapel whose roof caught his eye amid the greenery. Brave gentlemen had died at the end of

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 23

the alley-way bordered by yew hedges on the right—fought and died for the light love of a lady. Dawn had paled candles behind the deep-set oriel windows and seen a fortune, aye, ten fortunes, change hands across a little baize-covered table. The births of great men and famous women and their deaths had the old house known for twenty generations, and once (so the chroniclers record) murder most foul.

But the boy was less concerned with the house than the gleam of a lake beyond the lawns. Water always called him, were it sea or river or puddle by the roadside.

He emerged from the park, a hot, dishevelled, breathless little figure, and set off at a trot to where the ornamental lake was situated. A stream meandered down to the head of the lake, and following it he came presently to the stone coping (it had been a fish pond in monastic days) and espied a tall figure, lazily whipping the surface of the lake with a trout rod. It was Graeme Jakes, and so intent was he upon his occupation that not until Cornelius James panted to his side did he turn his head.

"Hullo, sprite!" he said. "Where have you sprung from?"

"I've got a letter," gasped Cornelius James, "about our coming to tea with you."

"Oh," said the prospective host, and then in a tone of anxiety that would have astonished his step-sister: "You are coming, aren't you?"

24 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Rather," said the boy. "We're all coming." He held out the letter. "This is for Lady Manners. Shall I go in and give it to her?"

"That's all right," said Graeme, possessing himself of the missive. "I'll take it."

He wound in his line and stood staring across the lawns in the direction of the old house.

"We are looking forward to coming," said Cornelius James. "Frightfully. Jane hopes we can play hide and seek."

"Of course you can," said Graeme. "You can do any blessed thing you like."

"And you'll play, too?"

"I?" Graeme's tone was one of apprehension, but mingled with it was a note of pleased anticipation the child's ear was quick to catch. "Are you sure you want *me*? I'm not much good at games; it's rather a long time since I played hide and seek, you know."

"Of course you'll have to join in," replied Cornelius James. They were walking side by side in the direction of the house. "That's all we're coming for." He looked up into Graeme's face with a boy's frank affection in his gaze.

There are men proof against the blandishments of women, charm they never so wisely, but none entirely unsusceptible to a child's naïve advances.

Graeme flicked the supple rod to and fro over his shoulder.

"Right-ho!" he said gruffly, and then after a

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 25

half-awkward pause added: "Would you like a peach?"

The boy signified assent to the proposal, and they skirted the flower-beds, leaving the house on their left and entered the walled garden.

Cornelius James rapidly disposed of two peaches and a pear while Graeme stood watching him with a smile lurking about the corners of his mouth.

"Better take some back for the other sprites," he said, and gathered four peaches. "Here you are—two each. Shove 'em in your pockets."

Cornelius James gravely accepted the gift, and prepared to depart.

"Thanks awfully," he said, and hesitated. "I say, would you mind if I took one back for Miss Mayne? She loves peaches."

"I'd forgotten Miss Mayne," he said. "Of course she can have some. Here! Where's your cap?" He selected and picked the fruit with a pre-occupied air, then suddenly: "Does—does Miss Mayne play hide and seek?"

Cornelius James nodded. "She plays everything," he said with enthusiasm. "You wait!"

They had regained the terrace and stood looking out across the smiling countryside.

"You haven't seen Miss Mayne yet, have you?"

"No," said Graeme. He stood motionless for a minute after his visitor had departed, watching the small figure dwindling in the distance. Then drawing the letter from his pocket he opened and read it.

26 An Awfully Big Adventure

It was a formal acceptance of half a dozen lines written in a clear, round, rather girlish hand and signed "Claire Mayne." But the reader scrutinised it as if it had been a photograph, and re-read it twice ere he replaced it in his pocket and walked slowly back to the house.

"I wonder what she looks like," he said, musing, and then remembered rather uneasily that he had omitted to mention to his visitor the absence of the mistress of the household. In the hall he encountered the housekeeper.

"Oh, Mrs. Mackworth, those children are coming to tea to-morrow. I shall be in, and I will—er—entertain them."

Mrs. Mackworth, who had had in contemplation a tea-party to two cronies in her own room, looked relieved at the intelligence.

"Then you won't require my presence, Mr. Graeme?"

"No, thank you," replied Graeme, with the desperate calm of a man who had deliberately burned his boats.

4

The following morning found the children in a glow of pleasurable anticipation which their landlady, on learning of the impending visit, cheerfully fanned to fever pitch. She had been a house-

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 27

maid "up at the house" in her youth, and held the children spellbound with her description of its glories.

"There's armour there enough for a regiment of soldiers," she said with fine disregard of modern military equipment, "and pictures by the mile. Chimney-vases hundreds of years old, worth their weight in gold, standing about in corners like dirt. Mind, too," she added, with a ring of sombre reminiscence in her tones, "they break if you so much as look at 'em. Don't forget to see the tapestry that was wove by a queen and her ladies, and if Mr. Graeme's there, get him to show you the secret passage—there's one behind a sliding panel in Sir Malcolm's library."

"Oh!" gasped Jane and Cornelius James in chorus.

"Graeme will be there," cried the latter with dancing eyes.

"And a nice young gentleman he is," said the woman. "Comes here to get my husband to go ferreting and drops in afterwards for a cup of tea. Quiet, you know, and unassuming; happier, they say, with us farmer folk than with lords and ladies of the County. That's the gossip in these parts, but I was never one myself for——"

"Did you say we should meet him?" inquired Georgina of her brother, with lofty indifference a shade over accentuated.

"Yes," was the reply, "and you needn't put on

28 An Awfully Big Adventure

airs because you are going to have tea with a grown-up man."

"And a silly little boy," retorted Georgina, nettled. She sighted Miss Mayne.

"Corney's frightfully jealous that we're going to steal his beloved Mr. Jakes from him," she scoffed.

Miss Mayne laughed merrily. "Cheer up, Corney," she said. "We don't want your old Mr. Jakes, whoever he may be." She rumbled his hair affectionately.

The child slipped his arm through that of the woman.

"No," he replied, and looked up at her fair face quizzing down at him; a little smile lit his eyes in innocent roguery. "No, but he may want *you*!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Mayne. "Why, I do believe Georgie was right!"

"How right?"

"I believe you *are* a silly little boy, after all."

Beneath another roof in the country Graeme Jakes formed the topic of conversation that summer morning. The Misses Smedley were alone in the music-room of The Garth, where Alicia was practising a "Jazz" waltz on the piano. Josephine, swaying her body sinuously to the rhythm, smoked a cigarette while she stared out of the window.

"He's not what you'd call good looking," she said, "exactly."

The Wooing of Mouldy Jake's 29

"No," replied Alicia, turning her music and nodding jerkily as the tune progressed.

"All the same," said Josephine, "there's something rather——" she writhed expressively.

The fair Alicia played in silence for some moments. "Don't work up a 'pash' over him till you know more about him. For all you know, he's married already—or wrapped up in another girl. Sailors are devils."

Josephine took three "Jazz" steps across the room and threw the stump of her cigarette into the fireplace. "I like devils," said the supple virgin, "'specially ugly ones."

Her sister stopped playing, wheeled round on the music-stool, and taking a cigarette out of a box on the piano, bounced it end-on with merciless violence against her thumbnail before putting it in her mouth.

"I believe you are so dev'lish intrigued with this man because he snubbed you the other day," she drawled.

Josephine laughed. "There are some men one would rather like to be beaten by—— Al, can you think of an excuse to go over there this afternoon? What about those theatricals at Aldbury—can't we ask him to act in them? He won't, of course—that sort's too self-conscious—but it would be a decent excuse."

"Obvious," said the more experienced Alicia.

"Rot—be a sport."

"But he leaves me cold," objected the "sport."

30 An Awfully Big Adventure

"So much the better. Didn't I help you when young Maunder was staying at Norton Hall? You owe me one over *that*."

"Oh, all right, then," assented Alicia. "I shall have to gas to Lady Manners all the afternoon. 'Snice, I don't think."

"Lady Manners is away. Gone to town with old Sir Stick-in-the-mud. But, of course, we shan't know that—get all in a flutter——"

Alicia opened her heavy-lidded eyes wide. "My *dear!*" she cried, and then, spinning round to the key-board, vamped the opening bars of Mendelssohn's Wedding March.

"Shur-r-r up!" shrieked Josephine, with a burst of abrupt laughter somehow suggestive of the cry of the green woodpecker.

All unconscious of the tremors he had awakened in the maidenly bosom of Josephine Smedley, Graeme Jakes sallied forth to meet his guests. He had mapped out a programme for their amusement with considerable care, harking back in memory to the far-off days when as a little boy he was bidden to spend adventurous afternoons at adjoining country houses, where there were always swarms of children, and the gardeners locked the doors of the wall-gardens as a precaution——

Well, there would be no doors locked that afternoon. He had seen to that, and the tea, with its piles of cakes and pyramids of fruit, bowls of cream and dishes of Mrs. Mackworth's famous preserves,

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 31

materialised the vision of a meal he had always dreamed as a child, and somehow never achieved in waking hours.

He met his guests half-way up the avenue through the park, a demure-looking little group from which first Cornelius James and then Jane detached themselves and sped to greet him.

"Look," said Jane, extending decorously gloved fingers, "tell Miss Mayne you hate people with gloves. She made us wear them—Georgie and me."

"Did she?" said the host, and advanced to welcome the autocrat who had decreed gloves. Of course, Emily would expect children to wear gloves——

He was face to face with Miss Mayne, with Georgina at her side. The governess had overheard Jane's protest, and was laughing as they shook hands. Graeme approved of her laugh; it produced tiny wrinkles at the side of her nose, giving her face an ingenuous and infectious merriment. Despite the pre-occupation of the apology he was mentally framing, Graeme noticed that her eyes were grey, and that there were freckles powdered like gold-dust about the attractive nose.

"I ought to have let you know before," he said. "I hope you don't mind, but the fact is, my step-sister is away. She and her husband have had to go up to town."

The smile faded from Miss Mayne's face. "I'm sorry. We didn't know."

32 An Awfully Big Adventure

Her regard, meeting the man's, somehow reminded him of the searching look Cornelius James had given him at their first encounter.

"Emily entrusted me with the job of explaining her absence and apologising. I should have done both sooner, but, somehow, it never entered my head. I have been looking forward so much to having a party——" He grinned boyishly and flushed.

Miss Mayne was sophisticated enough to interpret aright all that quick flush meant. Her smile returned like a reassured rabbit sallying forth again from its burrow.

"It's very brave of you," she said, "and we are ever so grateful, because we've been looking forward to this afternoon, too, haven't we, Georgina?"

Georgina awkwardly confirmed this; she was at the shy age of girlhood—the age at which youth finds itself a trifle superfluous in Nature's inexorable scheme.

"Very well, then," said their host, "we will proceed according to plan, as the Hun said when he retreated," and led the way towards the house.

For the first time in his life he played the host, and the rôle became him. True, the house was not his, but he knew and loved it, in his shy, unobtrusive fashion, and showed a knowledge of its contents that more than once caused Miss Mayne to glance at him with a half surprised, veiled appreciation. She herself spoke little, but, when she did, displayed a love of the beautiful and no small knowledge of many of

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 33

the arts that beautified the interior of the mansion. The little party had reached the portrait gallery, and at Georgina's request Mouldy Jakes furnished them with thumb-nail sketches of the life histories of the originals. He talked in a dryly humorous fashion that held the children alternately entranced and convulsed with laughter, warming to his self-imposed task as Miss Mayne caught the infectious mirth and echoed the children's gurgles with her own clear sweet laugh.

"And who is that?" inquired Georgina, pointing to a bloodless-looking dame in blue satin holding a toy spaniel in her preposterously tapering hands.

"Ah!" said their host, "now we're getting to the really interesting ones. I was saving her for the last. There's a story about her you won't believe."

"Tell," commanded Jane, possessing herself of his undamaged hand.

"Well, this particular lady died—or at least they thought she was dead, and they planted—that's to say, buried her, in the vault attached to the chapel—I'll show you the place later on. She had a wedding-ring which was supposed to carry special luck to its wearer—it was rolled out of a piece of gold looted from a joss-house by some adventurous Manners. Anyhow, she was buried with this ring on, and in the night, one of the gardeners thought that, being alive and having use for good luck, he might as well have the ring as leave it where it was."

34 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Oh," said Miss Mayne, "I know the story—never mind, go on!" She turned and stared curiously at the impassive features of the lady.

"Well, the gardener got hold of the ring; he'd been apprenticed to a burglar as a lad before he took up gardening, and he had strong nerves as well. The trouble was that he couldn't separate the ring from the lady, and he didn't want *her*. He pulled hard, but he couldn't get it off. Not for nuts."

"I know what *I* should have done," said Cornelius James. "I should have cut off her finger."

"Corney!" protested his shocked sisters.

"Well, that was more or less his idea. The trouble was he hadn't got a knife—he wasn't a sailor; but he had been the next best thing for the purpose—a dog-fancier."

"I thought you said he had been a burglar?" interposed Jane severely. Consistency in details she invariably insisted upon when told a story.

"Oh," gasped Miss Mayne, as the significance of the gardener's former pursuit suddenly became plain, "you surely don't mean——"

"He was in a hurry. P'raps the job *was* getting on his nerves after all. He started in, and when he was half-way through the lady sat up. She wasn't dead—only in a trance."

"What did the gardener do?" asked Cornelius James feverishly.

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 35

"At the time he ran away," replied Mouldy in sepulchral tones, "but later on he repented and joined the Church."

"And the lady lived happily ever afterwards?" insisted Jane the punctilious.

"Certainly," said Mouldy. "And now, before we have tea, I'll show you all the ring." He ran up the stairway at the end of the gallery and returned a few minutes later with a little casket.

"It is supposed to bring luck to any woman who slips it on her wedding finger," said the host, opening the lid and taking out a heavy plain ring.

"Let me put it on," said Georgina. She extended a slim sunburnt paw, and Mouldy gravely slipped it on the third finger of her left hand.

"What a weight," she said, and turned her hand admiringly, contemplating it after the manner of women, with her head on one side.

"Do you feel all funny?" inquired Jane, with obvious anxiety. "The luck——"

"No, silly," replied her sister. "Here, you put it on." She drew it off and slipped it on Jane's small finger. "Now Miss Mayne."

Miss Mayne shook her head laughingly. "No," she said, "my luck doesn't want any improving. I'm quite content with everything as it is."

Her host glanced at her quizzically. She certainly did not look as if she had many grounds for complaint, as she stood with her hands behind her back

36 An Awfully Big Adventure

and mirth in her pretty eyes, a gracefully poised, perfectly healthy, happy specimen of young womanhood.

"Oh, Miss Mayne, but you *must!*" cried her charges in unison.

"You can never have too much of a good thing, you know," endorsed the host. Without quite knowing why, he was aware that his heart was beating a shade fast. He wanted her to put the ring on. He had an absurd inexplicable desire to put it on her finger himself.

"Just put it on the tip," pleaded Jane. "*Please.*"

Miss Mayne was now blushing unaffectedly, and furious with herself.

"Why not?" asked Graeme with masculine obtuseness.

"You needn't put it *right* on," said Georgina soothingly. Abruptly Miss Mayne yielded. The affair threatened to develop into a scene; she felt self-conscious and embarrassed.

"Very well," she consented, and held out her hand to Jane. "Put it on the tip, it's too small for me to wear."

Jane complied, but Cornelius James intervened and pounced on her extended finger. "No, no," he cried, "properly! You *must* have all the luck!" and thrust the gold circle over her knuckle.

Miss Mayne tugged at it unavailingly. The blush had gone and a look of annoyance creased her brows. "It won't come off," she murmured.

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 37

"Never mind," said Graeme; "don't worry. We'll have tea, and then Mrs. Mackworth shall bring you some soap and warm water. Tea's ready now."

"I'd rather——" began the girl, and stopped. She had made enough fuss over the wretched thing, she decided. "Very well," she said reluctantly, and they descended to the dining-room, and the Gargantuan repast Graeme had prepared.

As the meal progressed, the friendly relations Graeme had established with the children increased to something approaching intimacy. Miss Mayne's annoyance disappeared and her whimsy of a smile returned. The incident of the ring was forgotten, and no one mentioned it. Only she remained somehow conscious of it as she sat with her hand unobtrusively concealed from view upon her lap.

Tea was nearing its conclusion when the butler entered and approached Graeme's chair.

"The two Miss Smedleys, sir, have called. I said her Ladyship was away, but they said, if they might, they'd like to see you for a minute."

"See *me!*" groaned the victim. "Oh, who wouldn't sell his little farm and go to sea? Why do they want to see me?"

"Couldn't say, sir," said the butler, with faint disapproval in his tone.

Graeme gazed at him with undisguised panic in his face.

38 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Look here, Hobbes," he said, "I'm not going to face those man-eaters alone. You can show 'em in here. I suppose they'll have to have tea."

Then to the children, who sat wide-eyed and silent during this confab, he appealed. "You'll all help me, won't you?"

"Rather!" exclaimed Cornelius James, all his martial instincts aroused by the reference to man-eaters, but quite at a loss as to what was expected of him.

"Course we'll help," echoed Georgina, with something nearer comprehension.

"Well, then, you must just pretend I'm your father."

"What fun!" cried Jane, and they rose as the door opened and the Misses Smedley stood, somewhat taken aback, on the threshold.

"How d'you do," said Graeme advancing. "I hope you don't mind a schoolroom tea round the dining-table, but the fact is, I—when the children are here—we always have tea together."

The Misses Smedley bowed confusedly to Miss Mayne.

"We won't stop, ta fearfully all the same—we only wanted to ask you to act in some theatricals," said Josephine; "they're next week, and we're in a tearing hurry. Think it over and let us know as soon as you can."

"I," said Graeme. "Do you mean you want *me*

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 39

to act?" He turned to the party round the table. "Children, can you imagine your father acting in amateur theatricals?"

The response was an outburst of unbridled merriment, in course of which Cornelius James, seated next to Miss Mayne, upset his teacup.

The Misses Smedley took advantage of the ensuing confusion to beat a retreat.

"Well," said Alicia, "we just popped in on the off-chance you *would*, don't you know, being next-door neighbours, and all that kind of thing. Now we must fly off and beat up someone else." Her insolent eyes roved round the table. She appeared to be pre-occupied with some mental arithmetical calculation.

"Won't you have some tea first?" said Miss Mayne. The instant she had spoken she regretted it, but the intimacy of the afternoon, the feeling of knowing almost as much about the house and its contents as the owners, perhaps some faint promptings of loyalty to her sex, produced a spontaneous offer of hospitality that she knew was not hers to make.

"No, thanks really," said Josephine, already in retreat. "We haven't time now. Good-bye, and do try to persuade your husband to help us with these wretched theatricals."

Graeme and Miss Mayne stared blankly at each other. Through the open window came the sound of a car being cranked furiously.

40 An Awfully Big Adventure

The children's faces were eyeing their elders as if uncertain how to take this unexpected turn of events.

"They don't really eat men, do they?" said the awed voice of Cornelius James.

"You don't honestly think——" began Miss Mayne, her colour once more supplanting her smile. "Oh, couldn't you tell them—run out and say I—we——"

Graeme hastened after the visitors with belated promptings of conscience and the laws of hospitality, but before he reached the hall the splutter of gravel and the hum of the engine told the listeners in the dining-room he was too late.

"He's waving good-bye," said Alicia, as the car swerved and rocked down the avenue, looking back and brandishing her gloves.

"Let him!" snapped Josephine, opening the throttle. "Some men are the limit. Fancy all those children. Disgusting, I call it. Why, the eldest was fourteen, if she was a day."

"*She* looked idiotically young," said Alicia.

"Probably their step-mother. Didn't she look daggers when we walked in! I suppose she is his wife?"

"'Course she is; didn't you see her wedding ring? I spotted it when that kid upset his cup and she started mopping up the mess. 'Course she's his wife."

"H'm," was the comment of the sporting Alicia.

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 41

5

Graeme Jakes accompanied his guests as far as the gateway to Glebe Farm when finally they departed. The sun was dipping behind the hills and rabbits were showing themselves along the lane; it was a golden evening of incredible peacefulness, but in Graeme's mind a shadow of remorse lingered.

"Look here, Miss Mayne," he began awkwardly when a temporary absence of the children, who had run to greet the farm terrier, made intimate speech possible. "I'm awfully sorry for the stupid mistake that Smedley girl made. I feel I am really to blame, although nothing was further from my mind——"

Miss Mayne was silent and Graeme shot a swift glance at her profile which, beyond enabling him to note that her eyelashes were long and curved up a little at the tips, afforded him no comfort. They walked a few paces through clouds of jiggling gnats.

"Shall we not talk about it any more?" said Miss Mayne at length.

"I don't want to talk about it. I only wanted to reassure you, in case you might feel any annoyance. You see, they'll have found out the truth by now. They certainly won't waste time making inquiries——" He smiled grimly. "And if anything more comes of it, the worst will be a visit of apology to you from the pair of 'em."

He crinkled his eyes in the sunset light and

42 An Awfully Big Adventure

scanned the figures of the children ahead of them.

"Why!" he murmured. "Of course it's absurd! It's comic! Fancy me——" and stopped on delicate ground.

Miss Mayne smiled too. "I hope I shall be spared apologies. As long as they realise at once—— As you say——" She hesitated and drove the point home. "The idea is—comic! And," she added graciously, "I'm not in the least angry with you."

So ended Graeme's party. He retraced his steps, puffing furiously at his pipe, jolted out of the accustomed orbit of his thoughts as completely as a maiden after her first dance.

On the whole he had enjoyed the afternoon immensely and found himself wondering why he had never done anything of the sort before. They were such jolly kids; the brown-faced, impulsive Cornelius James, aglow with imagination and as affectionate as a puppy; Jane, a feminine edition of him, with thick hair, "bobbed" above the nape of her white neck (he had discovered for the first time the witchery that lies in the back of a child's neck); and Georgina, shy, long slip of a thing with eyes like a fawn and hints of a not-distant womanhood in her quick changes of colour and the pretty immature curves of her young body.

Of Miss Mayne he thought with a queer mixture of compunction and pleasure. She so obviously would

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 43

have enjoyed the afternoon had it not been for the lamentable business of the ring, and the ridiculous remark addressed to her by Josephine Smedley. Her husband indeed . . . ! Somehow that possible interpretation never entered his head when he suggested temporarily adopting the children. The ring she was still wearing during tea must have been responsible for it. He wished they had got it off with soap and water when she wanted to, instead of leaving it till afterwards. "Comic!" The intonation in Miss Mayne's voice came back to him as she echoed the word. After all, why comic——?

He wondered, sailor-like, what manner of man her brother had been, that dead Guardsman who slept "in Flanders' fields." He realised with an unfamiliar thrill the fearless, frank way she had looked him in the eyes, the poise of her head, the gay quality of her laugh, and somehow wished he had had that man for a pal; he, who since boyhood had never really opened his heart to another human being.

He found a letter from his step-sister awaiting him on his return. It was a hurried epistle communicating the fact that Sir Malcolm was in bed with influenza, which at that time was raging in London. It postponed their return indefinitely and bade Graeme make himself as comfortable as circumstances permitted in their absence until the end of his leave.

Perhaps nothing more was necessary than this absence of Lady Manners from the scene to mature Graeme's friendship with his new acquaintances.

44 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

From the formal invitation to a return party at Glebe Farm penned by Georgina and signed by all three children, they passed by rapid stages to an easy comradeship. In a week the boy and both girls were as free of the demesne as Graeme was of the noisy teas in the farm parlour. Further, the latter unearthed a governess cart out of the stables, and harnessing a fat pony between the shafts, led them off on long rambling expeditions amongst the thickly-wooded hills, and lanes drowsy with the scent of honeysuckle.

It is not for me to attempt any convincing record of the imperceptible stages by which, as the days passed, Graeme fell in love with Claire Mayne.

She obtruded upon his thoughts as sunlight enters a room past curtains waving in the breeze, while with the dour perversity of his queer nature he tried to shut her out.

There were women about whom no one could cherish any illusions; with these Graeme Jakes was half contemptuously, half pityingly at ease. But in Claire Mayne he saw someone who approached so exquisitely to his ideal of womanhood that he dreaded disillusionment. Thus and thus must his goddess be fashioned, and the first word or act of hers that betrayed feet of clay would have filled him with bitterness and disappointment.

However, as time went on, one after another he drew forth timidly from the secret hiding-place

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 45

of his soul some fresh idealism; draping them about his conception of her, until the real and the imaginary woman blended into that dear, everlastingly inaccessible unreality which is all mankind's first love.

Transports of this nature are usually apparent enough in the demeanour; but Graeme Jakes's oriental imperturbability of countenance gave not the slightest betrayal of the turmoil in his thoughts.

Claire Mayne herself remained serenely unconscious of anything in the air more vibrant than a grave friendliness and a shy, half-reluctant admiration. She would not have been the normal, healthy young woman she was had she not thought about him a good deal. When the children were in bed and the stars made visible the dark outline of the hills opposite, she sat by her open window, with the tiny room behind her in darkness; there, chin in hand, she tried to assign him to some known category amongst her limited male acquaintances, and found the task difficult.

Since girlhood her pet character in fiction had been Alan Breck; not for his swashbuckling gallantry, nor the efficient way with him in sword play, but because, as she herself put it, "he wanted looking after so dreadfully."

Graeme Jakes, in some subtle way that eluded analysis, appealed to her in much the same manner. His clothes lacked buttons at times and his hair was generally dreadfully untidy. She would like, she

46 An Awfully Big Adventure

thought, to brush his hair for him . . . in a brisk, sisterly fashion.

The tranquillity of her meditations would have been sorely disturbed could she have seen the object of her thoughts. Half a mile away, from a vantage point amid the dewy bracken, stood her devout lover, watching with all a lover's faculty for self-hypnotism a light burning behind a blind in one of the upper windows of the farm. Fondly he watched its orange glow through the darkness until it was abruptly extinguished, and returned home in a mood of exalted melancholy. Judge though how greater the melancholy had he realised the blind screened no other than the conjugal chamber of the farmer and his wife. . . .

The days went by thus to merge into weeks, and the children's visit was fast drawing to a close. Graeme, too, had received orders to attend at the Admiralty for medical survey. The halcyon days were numbered.

They had planned an expedition to the coast, an all-day affair that was to include sea-bathing for the children, for the last day. The sun shone out of a cloudless sky, the air was clear and sweet with autumn scents, and the cavalcade set forth on the appointed morning in wild spirits. Mrs. Mackworth had provided lunch and tea, and the food, together with bathing things, cameras, and all the impedimenta of a holiday, were piled into the pony cart. Miss Mayne held the reins and Georgina walked at the pony's

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 47

head; Jane and her brother ranged along the hedges like a couple of terriers; while Graeme brought up the rear, outwardly cheerful, but inwardly experiencing the varied sensations of a man who has decided to propose ere the going down of the sun to a damsel whose only concern appeared to be to avoid being left alone in his company.

They reached the sea about noon; Graeme had chosen a little bay where the sands were safe for bathing. The coast stretched away on one hand in a waste of dunes and marsh, and on the other rose in indented cliffs from a rock-strewn beach.

On the top of the cliffs they unpacked the baskets, turned the pony loose to graze, and, when the children had had their longed-for bathe, lunched *al fresco* as might the gods have eaten upon Olympus.

It was after lunch that Graeme made his first anxious bid for the company of Miss Mayne alone. "Supposing you three go and explore the caves," he suggested to the children, a clumsy argument which, for its very ingenuousness, roused no suspicions in that maiden's heart.

"But what about you and Miss Mayne?" inquired Jane.

"Well," said Graeme feebly, "p'raps we'll go and look for seagulls' eggs along the cliffs."

"Gulls don't lay eggs in September," said Miss Mayne. "Why shouldn't we all go and explore caves?"

48 An Awfully Big Adventure

Nothing was further from her mind than the imminence of the proposal shaping itself on Graeme's lips, but a pretty loyalty to the children's parents forbade her to let them out of her vision. "A nice business," said her conscience, "if one of them got hurt. Where was Miss Mayne? Philandering somewhere out of sight with a Naval officer. . . . Well, not philandering exactly, but——"

"I thought perhaps you might be tired," broke in the voice of the Naval officer upon her meditations.

"Not in the least," she replied. "Come along, we'll all go down to the beach."

So off they set and awakened the echoes of the shallow caves with their voices, explored the pools left by the tide; built with the aid of pieces of drift-wood a sand castle that had cockle shells for windows and a tiny green crab as keeper of the gateway, and through all the absorption of this light nonsense Graeme was conscious of Claire Mayne, whether she spoke or was silent, in view or out of sight, as a man is aware of the sunlight and the wind on his cheek. She seemed inevitable—inevitable and indispensable.

The children found him dullish and rather distraught.

Curiously enough it was she who at last gave him his opportunity to speak his heart. The children decreed it was time for their next bathe, and while they undressed in the shelter of the rocks, Graeme set about unpacking the tea-things and boiling the kettle. He watched, kneeling, the three slim forms scamper across the short stretch of sands in the sunlight to

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 49

meet the incoming tide, and suddenly Miss Mayne joined him on the cliff.

"I'll help you," she said; "I can watch the children from here and cut bread and butter at the same time. They are quite safe."

Her manner was unconcerned; she spoke in the unrestrained note of comradeship, and stood watching the children capering in the sunlit waves, with the wind moulding her garments to her long limbs and drawing loose tendrils of her hair in careless, happy disorder across the curve of her cheek outlined against the sky.

Graeme knelt observing her, suddenly tongue-tied. You can invent speeches to a goddess, aye, and deliver them effectively enough to a silent night of stars, but this radiant, composed girl was flesh and blood; he could almost see the warm vitality glowing through her skin. She needed no clap-trap speech about love such as fellows deliver in novels. . . . He rose to his feet. The wind and the sunshine and the sound of the sea seemed to sing and shout together. "Man! Here's your mate at last!" was the burden of the song. "Here's the goal of all your heart's desire; the haven of your soul's adventure! Look at her, shaped for you by incalculable forces and laws, beautified and perfected and handed down through infinite ages, to stand thus within your arms' reach. Yours, man, if you can but win her! Tell her, fool . . . tell her."

"I'm glad you came," said the fool, and his voice, husky and unfamiliar, startled him.

50 An Awfully Big Adventure

A sound, distinct from the noises of wind and shore, obtruded upon his consciousness as he spoke, and the girl heard it too, for she wheeled sharply and stood staring, not at her companion, but back across the sheep-cropped turf.

Two horses were approaching at a canter, near enough already for their riders' faces to be discernible. One was Josephine Smedley; the other, a vapid-faced young man in extravagant equestrian attire. They drew rein and approached the cliff at a walk, Miss Smedley waving her whip in greeting. Her companion touched his horse with the spur, holding it on the curb while it curveted effectively.

"Topping day!" cried Josephine. "Watching the kids bathe, Mrs. Jakes?"

Graeme heard the girl give a little gasp. She stood quite motionless for a few seconds and then, still staring at the rider, he heard her say in a low voice, as if speaking to herself: "This has gone far enough; it's got to stop." Miss Smedley's cavalier had rather overdone the spur business and was having considerable difficulty in controlling his horse, which was plunging and pulling some distance away.

Graeme stepped forward. "I'll explain," he said. "Miss Smedley——"

"No," interrupted Claire Mayne, "leave this to me. You should have explained before this." She took a few steps in the direction of the other girl. "Miss Smedley," she said in a clear voice, "I think

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 51

it only right I should tell you I am not married. I am not Mr. Jakes's wife." She paused, apparently from loss of breath.

In the middle distance the young man, obviously losing control of his mount, was shouting something over his shoulder. Miss Smedley glanced in his direction and then looked Claire Mayne brutally from head to toe. "Please don't apologise," she said, "I—we suspected as much." It took the short, hard laugh that followed the words to drive the insult home. She flicked her horse sharply on the flank and rode after her escort.

The sound of the horses' hoofs had died away before Miss Mayne spoke.

"Did she mean—was that woman trying to——?" she began, and stopped. Mechanically she knelt down and began setting out the tea-things as if in a trance.

"Why didn't you leave it to me?" expostulated Graeme, kneeling beside her. "I'd have explained properly. She misunderstood . . . or pretended to."

The girl raised a face from which all vestige of colour had fled. Her eyes were wide and pitiful; she held a sugar basin in one hand, in the other a butter knife.

"But I *did* explain," she said. "How could I know . . . ?"

"You should have left it to me," repeated Graeme. He put out his hand and took the sugar basin from her. She laid the butter-knife with precision be-

52 An Awfully Big Adventure

side the cabbage leaf containing the butter. Their actions were mechanical and inconsequent, as if the kneeling figures were two automata actuated by wires.

"I thought I'd left enough to you," she said. "You laughed it over the first time, as if it were a joke. Perhaps it was a joke. One would rather look at it in that light. But at least you could have made sure there would have been no second misunderstanding. No possibility of my being—being insulted." The colour flamed back into her cheeks. "And you did nothing—nothing." She bit her lower lip to control its trembling.

Graeme forced a wan smile. "There wasn't time, then. . . . But I *will* do something—and anyhow, it doesn't matter, really."

"Doesn't matter!" she echoed in frozen tones. "*Doesn't matter!* You put me in odiously false positions, you expose me to an outrageous insult . . . and you—you laugh and say it doesn't matter! Oh, this is intolerable!" Angry tears forced themselves to her eyelashes.

Graeme groped for the hand that fumbled for a preposterous handkerchief (with what care had that little scrap of cambric been selected a few short hours before, and with what unconsciousness of the purpose it would serve!) "Claire! Claire! don't you understand, I want you to marry me."

She whipped to her feet. "Oh, don't be absurd!" she cried. "Do you imagine—is this your idea of

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes 53

doing something? Of rep—reparation for dragging my name—my brother's——" She was weeping now.

From somewhere on the sands below came the voices of the children returning from their bathe. With a wrung heart Graeme realised his chance had gone; the children could see them. Miss Mayne turned her face from the sea. "I'm going for a walk for a few minutes," she said; "will you all start tea?"

"But won't you give me a chance to speak to you later on?" gasped Graeme, "just for a second. It isn't anything to do with this wretched business. I mean I don't want you to marry me just because——"

Miss Mayne turned a tear-wet face towards him for one instant. "If you are what I once thought you were—if you even remotely resemble what I've always heard of Naval officers, you'll never, never broach this odious topic again, by word or letter or implication."

And with that she went off along the cliff, walking very fast with her head bent.

Mouldy Jakes fell to buttering a slice of bread.

Dies irae ! And the night that followed, little better for most of the participators in that memorable picnic. Tears wetted two pillows at least; a third remained uncreased until the dawn by the head that ought to have lain there.

54 An Awfully Big Adventure

Cornelius James awoke on the morrow to manifold perplexities.

To Jane, his confidante in most tribulations, he unburdened himself after an early breakfast, what time Miss Mayne and Georgina, the former heavy-lidded and both uncommunicative, were putting finishing touches to the packing. The two children were taking a valedictory stroll round the farm.

"Miss Mayne's been crying," he observed gloomily. He abhorred tears.

Jane confirmed this with a nod that set her curls bobbing. "So's Georgie."

"I know." Cornelius James's tone was one of exasperation. "I'm sorry to be leaving Glebe Farm, but I don't cry about it. You're sorry, too, aren't you, Jane?"

Jane nodded again, but hesitated before disclosing the maiden secret of another's breast. "'Tisn't that, Georgie wasn't crying 'cos we're leaving, 'xactly."

"Then *why?*" demanded her brother. He scrambled on to the wall of the pigsty, and sat moodily dropping bits of stone on the porker's back.

"You see," explained Jane, not without diffidence, "she's in love."

"What next!" gasped her outraged brother. "Who's she in love with?"

"Mr. Jakes."

The Wooing of Mouldy Jakes' 55

Cornelius James could find no words applicable to the situation.

"But—but," he finally exclaimed, "even if she is, what's she got to cry about?"

Jane clambered up beside her brother. "Well, you see," she began, "it was that picnic."

"It was a jolly picnic," maintained the other.

"Yes, but Georgie counted on having Mr. Jakes all to herself on the way back."

"So she jolly well did!" commented her brother wrathfully.

"Yes, but he never opened his mouth 'cept once, and then he only said something about selling a farm and going to sea, and Georgie thinks he hates her."

Cornelius James pondered over this insight into the enigma of the feminine heart.

"She's an ass!" was his final comment. "And what about Miss Mayne? Don't tell me *she's* in love!" Assuredly the queen could do no wrong nor stoop to such folly.

"I don't know," replied Jane, "but last night I went to her room to borrow a ribbon to tie my hair up with 'cos I'd lost mine, an' she was lying on her bed with her face in her hands. I thought she had a headache, and I was going out again when she jumped up. Her face was all smeary and her eyes were red, like when her brother was killed. 'Member? I per-tended I didn't notice anything, and asked for the ribbon and she got it from a drawer and gave it

56 An Awfully Big Adventure

to me without a word, and suddenly she sat down on the window seat and put her arms round me and held me against her so tight I could hardly breathe."

The mystified eyes of the brother and sister met. "But didn't she say anything?" demanded the former. "Has anybody been killed she's fond of?"

"I don't think so," replied Jane; "she hardly said anything. Just whispered little soft words like 'darling.'"

"She did that when we tried to cheer her up 'cos her brother died," said the boy, as if condoning a lapse on Miss Mayne's part.

"Oh, there was one thing," added Jane after reflection; "she said, 'Oh, Janie, Janie, don't grow up!'"

Which left Cornelius James not much the wiser.

To a more sophisticated mind the utterance might have meant much or little. For my part I look for my clue to the riddle in a later remark Miss Mayne made aloud to the darkness, from off a crumpled tear-wet pillow.

"He never said he loved me," she pleaded. The darkness held no answer.

PART TWO

THE NARRATIVE OF COMMANDER WILLIAM DALRYMPLE
HORNBY, ROYAL NAVY

I

THE ship was doing her annual refit at a Dockyard Port in the south, and the Captain and I shared what leave there was going; in my case it amounted to eight days, and I spent them trout fishing in Breconshire. I have tried a good many experiments in the way of how to make the most of a week's leave, and I have come to the conclusion that few things take the taste of war out of a man's mouth as effectively as whipping a "mountainy" trout stream.

It was a long and tedious railway journey back; I suppose I am as fond of my ship as most Commanders: she probably means more to me than a ship does to a man with a wife and bairn of his own, but I can't say I looked forward to slipping into harness again after the week's freedom from routine and responsibility, and the contemplation of returning to another nine months' exile in the North Sea didn't add any gaiety to the train journey. I was uncommonly glad, therefore, when I changed at Bristol and walked into Frank Milsom on the platform.

He was a "Red" Marine and an old shipmate of

58 An Awfully Big Adventure

mine in the Mediterranean Flagship 'way back in the dark ages : one of those born leaders of men, possessing (although I believe it doesn't always follow) a curiously magnetic fascination for women. Yet I believe women bored him ; I remember he once told me he would as soon kiss a dog as a woman, unless he was drunk. He was full of "parlour-tricks," too—the things that make a man sought after as a mess-mate ; he could vamp a comic song and do sleight of hand conjuring tricks, and he had the most infectious laugh that ever kept a mouldy wardroom alive. The only vice I ever observed in him was a passion for gambling, but he had a peculiarity which is unusual in the Navy : we used to say he was "fey." He had queer dreams sometimes that used to come true—the date for paying off and things like that—and on one occasion I recollect drawing back the curtain of his cabin on my way down from the middle watch, because I heard him laughing and wondered who was with him at that hour. He was sitting up in his bunk with the moonlight pouring through the open scuttle, and his hand stretched out in gesticulation (a way he had when animated) ; otherwise the cabin was empty. He was wide awake, told me he was talking to his mother, and cursed me for interrupting. She was at the time about 2,800 miles away as the crow flies.

He came towards me wheeling a ramshackle motor-bicycle, with a cocker spaniel on a chain, and a porter following with his bags and golf clubs.

"Bill Hornby!" he said, and the years between us and our last meeting seemed to close up like a telescope. We climbed into an empty carriage and settled down in two corners facing each other, lugging out our pipes and 'baccy pouches preparatory to a long yarn when, just as the train was starting, there was a bit of a commotion outside. A porter jerked open the door, pitched a woman's dressing-case on to the seat (we were sitting at the end furthest from the door), and fumbled for his tip as the owner of the dressing-case followed. She was a long-legged, graceful girl, dressed in tweeds and rather neatly shod. Milsom swore softly under his breath when the dressing-case appeared and stopped filling his pipe. But presently, when the train had started and our fellow-passenger had settled down in the corner facing the engine next to the door and opened a novel, Milsom leaned forward in his seat and asked her permission to smoke.

Until she was addressed the girl had not shown that she was aware of our presence in the carriage. She had not even glanced in our direction, and now, hearing herself spoken to, she turned a rather pale face and two almost startled grey eyes towards each of us in turn.

"D'you mind this?" enquired Milsom, in the kindly tolerant voice in which he spoke to women, and held out his iniquitous looking briar for her inspection.

The girl shook her head unsmiling. "Not at all.

60 An Awfully Big Adventure

I—I——” she glanced swiftly from us to the window and the obvious

SMOKING

on the glass panel. “I beg your pardon,” she said. “I didn’t notice. I was late and the porter hustled me in——” She turned her eyes on me; she had well marked, delicate brows, and a firm chin. Altogether I thought her a remarkable-looking young woman (I was sitting with my back to the engine, facing her diagonally), and had it not been for a certain touch of diffidence in her rather shy manner, I should have written her down as decidedly strong-minded.

For a moment she looked as if she were contemplating flight to the corridors in search of another carriage.

“Train’s very full,” said Milsom, “but if you like I’ll go and see if there’s room in a non-smoker.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mind smoking—unless you mind my staying where I am?”

We both mumbled polite reassurances, and she returned to her book, obviously dismissing us completely from her consciousness.

For all our protestations, neither of us was much at ease after that; we kept up a desultory conversation for a bit, but we were unaccustomed to having women near us, and a man can’t talk squarely to another man with a woman in hearing. So after a bit we gave it up and retired behind our papers. I even dozed for a

bit, and must have slept for nearly an hour when I was awakened by my pipe dropping out of the corner of my mouth.

My eyes, as they opened, rested first on the girl. She appeared to be sleeping; at all events she was leaning back with her eyes closed and her book lying unheeded on her lap. I glanced at Milsom in front of me, and found him leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, staring across the carriage at the window beside the only vacant corner—that is to say, the one opposite the girl. There was a faintly puzzled expression on his face, and he kept glancing from the window to the girl. Then he looked at me with a queer enigmatic smile. We neither of us spoke, I suppose with the idea of not waking our fellow-passenger, but Milsom presently drew a pencil-case from the pocket of his waistcoat and scribbled something on the margin of his newspaper. This he handed to me :

“Come and sit beside me; don’t make a noise.”

I obeyed rather curiously, and he continued to study the window. We had just emerged from a short tunnel when he wrote again on his paper :

“Watch that window and tell me if you can see anyone’s reflection in it.” He indicated with a nod the window alongside the vacant seat opposite the girl.

I stared and could see nothing but the landscape and the telegraph poles flicking by. Then we plunged into a cutting, and for a moment the sheet

62 An Awfully Big Adventure

of glass became a mirror. I felt Milsom grip my arm hard above the elbow. "Well?" he breathed.

I shook my head, and for the third time he drew the paper on to his knee and scribbled hard.

"Don't tell me you couldn't see that bloke's reflection?"

I frowned at him in hopeless bewilderment. "What bloke?" I mouthed.

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head with raised eyebrows, and at that moment the train began to slow and shudder as the brakes were applied.

"Get back," he whispered, and I resumed my seat opposite him as the third occupant of the carriage began to stir her limbs like one awaking from sleep.

For the life of me I don't know why, but I had the feeling that it would be wrong to see her face as she opened her eyes. I somehow felt it would be like listening if she had talked in her sleep.

Milsom was collecting his impedimenta. "Change here," he said, yawning, and hauled the reluctant spaniel from under the seat. "This train goes on to London. Heigh-ho! Who wouldn't sell his little farm and go to sea?"

I was turning to get my rod down from the rack when I saw the girl give a little start and shoot a swift interrogatory glance at Milsom over her shoulder. It was the first symptom of interest she had shown in either of us. But after Milsom and I had disembarked on to the platform, and the train

began slowly to resume its journey Londonwards, I saw her knit her handsome brows and stare rather curiously at Milsom from the window of the moving train.

We stood beside our luggage in silence, watching the train pass from sight round a distant curve in the line.

Then I turned to Milsom. "Now," I said, "what did all those *billets doux* you wrote me mean?"

He looked at me quizzically. "Sure you saw no one there?"

"What d'you mean—reflected in the window?"

He nodded, with a smile hovering about the corners of his mouth.

"No, of course I didn't. There were only three of us in the carriage, and from where we were sitting—all facing the engine—that window couldn't catch the reflection of any of us. I've forgotten most of the optics I ever learned, but I remember enough to be sure of that."

Milsom fingered his moustache. "I might have realised——" he said musingly. He gave an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders and laughed softly.

I got rather irritated. "Come on, Soldier," I said. "For heaven's sake explain, and don't keep on with this Maskelyne and Devant business." But he shook his head, still laughing. "No," he said, "it's too good to waste here. Come and have dinner up at the Mess to-night and we'll exchange theories. And

64 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

now," he continued, hauling in the slack of the spaniel's chain, "let's buy a pack of cards and play picquet. Our train's due already."

The carriage was too full for me to broach the subject again, and Milsom took thirty shillings out of me instead. At our destination we parted: he to go to the Marine Depôt, where he was Adjutant; I in a musty four wheeler to the dockyard where the ship was lying.

2

Milsom greeted me a couple of hours later in the big oak-panelled hall of the Officers' Mess at the Marine Headquarters. I had been on board the ship, had half an hour's yarn with the Skipper (who was full of the ways of Dockyard Officials and the tale of our Defect List), shifted, and got up to the Marines' Mess as the first dinner bugles were sounding.

Every time I enter that hall, with its tattered Colours hanging from the walls and the portraits of bygone Commandants staring down over their gorgets, I am struck afresh by the reminders, cherished here on all sides, of the proud past of the Corps. Greenwich Hospital excepted, the Navy has no shrines where the emblems of its traditions are preserved, but the Marine Headquarters always seem to echo with whispers of the Marines' history. In the seconds that it took me to cross the wide floor, I had

a blurred vision of the Rock, taken by storm and held against odds; of haggard, fever-stricken detachments in rotting pith helmets, fighting their way through swamp and jungle, of the African sun catching the reddened bayonets of a desert square. . . .

"Cocktail, I think." Milsom beckoned to a waiter, and, slipping his arm through mine, drew me down beside him on to the high-padded fender of the old fireplace that is a miracle of carving. He had had a game of squash, he explained, and a tub since his arrival, and felt that he had decidedly earned a drink. "Plenty of time," he added as he lit a cigarette. "Guest night, and the Colonel's waiting for a guest!" We sipped our cocktails, and while we yarned I studied the gathering all round us on the look-out for old shipmates and familiar faces. The Commandant I knew well, a grizzled veteran, whose skin had been so baked by tropic suns that it had the appearance of ancient parchment. He came towards us for a few minutes' chat, limping slightly from the effects (so it was said) of a mauling by a lion in Somaliland, and sat rolling his cigarette round and round between his fingers and thumb, his keen old eyes watching the door for his guest. Markham was there, upright and groomed to the last hair, and the sight of his face instantly recalled the vision I always cherish of him astride the wall of a Chinese fort, plying his sword like a swashbuckler, and endeavouring to shield the body of an uncon-

66 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

scious N.C.O. from the pikes of the Boxer rabble below. Ye gods! And we called that war!

The hall was full, and the guests included a fair sprinkling of soldiers from neighbouring camps and a good many N.O.'s from ships in harbour. At one end of the room clustered a dozen freshly joined subalterns: they whispered constrainedly amongst themselves and eyed the assembly with furtive interest. "Straight out of the egg," observed Milsom. "Mammy's darlings, every one of 'em. They shall sing us Songs of Araby after dinner or I'll eat my hat." I had my own ideas how Milsom should amuse himself after dinner, but I said nothing. "Watch them gloating over Markham and his V.C." Markham, according to his kindly nature, had gone over and was talking to the new-comers. They clustered round him in the unabashed hero-worship of youth, their shyness perceptibly evaporating: clean, robust striplings with down on their upper lips and the stamp of the Public School plain upon them.

The swing doors opened and the Commandant tossed away his cigarette and rose as the guest of the Mess entered. He was a youthful Colonel of Marines on leave from the Western Front, a tall, lean man with a scar across his forehead and the look of wearied habitual alertness you always see in the faces of men fresh from the trenches, and also of our patrol Destroyer Officers. I had never seen him in the flesh, though the illustrated papers have by now made

him a familiar figure enough. For this was Henry Havelock, destined to wear before he died every gallantry award in the gift of England and France. He was a contemporary of Milsom's, and when presently we adjourned to the vast arched messroom, I found myself sitting between them at the Commandant's end of the table. The talk was war, of course, because war made up every man's experience of life for the past three years and a half. But the range and variety of the fields which were being discussed down the shining length of the mahogany table made it unique. In one sector it was Antwerp and the raging inferno that had once been Lierre held for a live-long night against the headlong onslaught of the Hun. In another, Gallipoli held sway, and as the wine circulated and tongues were loosened, tales of that splendid failure were told that assuredly will never find their way into any printed history of the Great War. The hum of voices under the old beams of the vaulted roof was the echo of strife carried from Serbia to the Cameroons, with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf thrown in. The only man who appeared disinclined to talk war was Havelock; he and Milsom were exchanging pre-war reminiscences of a visit paid by the Mediterranean Fleet to Monte Carlo; how a certain lady with an impulsive temperament lost her heart to the embarrassed Milsom, who was challenged to a duel by an indignant husband; this worthy Havelock plied with absinthe until he (the husband) was all for Havelock running off

68 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

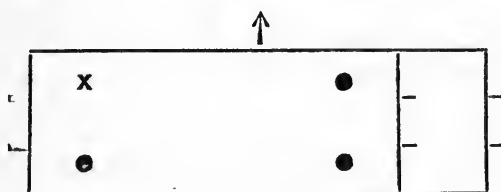
with the lady and thus easing a complicated situation; and as the evening wore on and the assiduous Corporal of Marines—brooding behind us with a gold-topped bottle gripped in one white cotton gloved fist—redoubled his attentions, Havelock's eyes lost their weary strained expression, and the stern lines round his mouth relaxed.

We had finished dinner and the port had gone round for the King, and following the second circulation the Commandant rose, and after a neat little speech, proposed Havelock's health, which we drank with musical honours. Havelock replied, and in a few brief sentences he sketched the part played, not by himself but by the Royal Marine Units at the front under his command. Listening to his pithy descriptive rendering into prose of the epic of Beaumont Hamel, it was not difficult to understand the magnetic command of men with which he has been credited, nor the devotion of their willingness to follow him to the gates of Hell.

The Commandant was for snooker after that. "Are you and your guest going to take a cue?" he asked Milsom, but Milsom shook his head. "No. They'll want me at the piano presently. Take Havelock along and some of the others." So Havelock and his host departed to gather in a party and Milsom beckoned for the cigars.

"Now," he said, "I promised you a yarn, didn't I? Well"—he clipped and lit a cigar—"I've been thinking about the whole thing, and what I am going

to tell you is partly theory and the rest ain't fact as you probably understand the term." He spilt a drop of water from his finger-bowl on to the shining surface of the table and sketched an oblong outline with the end of a burnt match. "This represents the carriage we were travelling in this afternoon with that young woman :



The arrow indicates the direction in which the train was travelling. The blobs are you and me opposite each other, and the other's the girl. Got that? Well——"

"What's the cross? " I asked.

"That's an empty seat. The symbol is 'X,' which stands for the unknown. That's the corridor on the right. Now, I was sitting facing the engine—this is me in the bottom right-hand corner—and from my seat I could see the window beside X quite clearly—naturally; and you may have observed that if something dark is placed between the light and a sheet of glass, the said sheet of glass becomes to all intents and purposes a mirror. The effect, I think, is increased if the observer is placed at an oblique angle to the surface of the glass. In other words, from where I was sitting I was better able to see a reflection in the glass than you were."

70 An Awfully Big Adventure

He drained his liqueur glass and puffed reflectively at his cigar for a few moments.

"We were running parallel to a goods train—a line of big, closed wagons, when I noticed a reflection in the window beside the blank seat. I noticed it because it wasn't—as it ought to have been—your reflection."

I laughed. "Whose was it—the Devil's?"

"No. A stranger's. I bent forward to have a better look at him because I couldn't see very clearly, when we drew ahead of the goods train and the reflection vanished."

Had it been anyone but Milsom telling the tale I should have put it down as pure invention, but as I have hinted Milsom possessed peculiar qualities, and I grew still more interested.

"Go on," I said.

"Well, I waited because I knew sooner or later I should get another chance; any cutting or tunnel we passed would do the trick. But up till then I hadn't somehow connected the thing with the girl. It didn't occur to me. I wasn't interested in her and I ain't well up on the science of these phenomena. However, in a little while we boomed into a tunnel and I got all I wanted. It was no one I'd ever seen before, a dark, thin, rather lugubrious-looking bloke. He had his arm through the leather loop thing and his hand was tied up in bandages."

"But do you mean you saw *him*?" I interrupted.

"No, no; his reflection only. And while I

watched he shook his head and smiled (not a very gay effort—sort of twisted) and said something; at least, his lips moved. Of course I looked instinctively at the girl then. She was sitting with her eyes shut and her head leaning back, but what gave me the clue was the fact that her lips moved too. She was talking to the fellow.”

My cigar had gone out, and I discovered my brandy was still untouched. I nodded, not because I understood any more clearly, but because I felt that words would break a spell.

“Now my mater—she died a couple of years ago, bless her dear soul—used to belong to a lot of societies that deal with phenomena of various kinds. I don’t mean spiritualistic séances and that sort of humbug, but suggestion and telepathy. She used to believe in a thing she called Projection; concentrating will power upon something until the thought becomes more or less a material object—like blowing tobacco smoke into a soap bubble—d’you tumble?”

I didn’t, but I nodded again.

He was hopelessly out of my depth, but I remembered spending a few days’ leave once with Milsom at his home when we were youngsters, and seeing a black spot against a white wall upon which his mother used to concentrate her mind entirely by way of mental exercise for long periods daily. She was a charming, sympathetic woman and, as far as I could observe, perfectly normal in other respects.

“Now if my mother had been sitting in the

72 An Awfully Big Adventure

carriage she'd have seen the actual figure. I couldn't do that, but I'm what they call clairvoyant enough to see the reflection. And then we whisked out of the tunnel, and I got you to come and sit beside her. I wanted to see if you could see him and recognise his face. As I've said, it was no one I've ever seen before."

I drank my brandy then because I felt I wanted it.

"What's it all mean, Soj? What's projection and bubbles full of smoke got to do with it? I'm a plain sailorman and I don't understand all this psychic business."

Milsom chuckled. "I don't understand it either," he said, "and God knows I don't want to understand too much. But this all seems simple enough to me. The girl was thinking desperately hard about some fellow—the hum of the wheels and the telegraph wires have a hypnotic effect upon some temperaments, and she just unconsciously projected the figure of the man she was thinking about into the seat opposite her and in her imagination was having a chat with him. She was probably in love with the real individual and possibly wasn't getting much joy out of it. She didn't look happy."

Voices from the ante-room were shouting Milsom's name: someone was strumming the piano. Milsom pushed back his chair.

"But was he really there, though?" I queried, as we rose. The long messroom was empty save for the waiters and ourselves. The hubbub in the ante-room

redoubled, and someone started a song. Milsom laughed.

"How d'you mean? Of course he wasn't there really. Just because you think of someone it doesn't mean they dump themselves down in front of you. Think of someone now."

I obeyed and stared hard at the portrait of an ensign of "The Noble Free and Spirited Manchester Corps of the Marines" hanging opposite.

Milsom followed the direction of my eyes. "That wasn't a good choice," he said dryly. "That fellow has been sitting opposite us for the last half-hour. Ever since Markham vacated that chair!"

It occurred to me that perhaps Milsom had had all the liqueur brandy to drink that was good for him.

3

It may or may not have been the effect of the old brandy, but in all the years Milsom and I were ship-mates I never remember him in a mood of such sheer light-hearted reckless gaiety as that into which he seemed to slip on the threshold of the ante-chamber.

A sing-song was in progress round the piano, but on his arrival the group turned and bellowed for "The Tuppenny Tube." "The Tuppenny Tube," it must be explained, was a song of his own invention, accom-

74 An Awfully Big Adventure

panied by a great deal of patter and not a little horse-play. In pantomime he herded the Public (the newly joined subalterns filled the rôle) into an imaginary overcrowded tube lift, and with clashing fire-irons imitated the closing and opening of the gates. His stentorian bellow of "'Urry up there, step smartly ! Plenty of room in front ! " was the gag that presently involved the Mess and its guests in a furious mêlée amid overturned card-tables and chairs. Little did we guess as we sprawled gasping, breathless with laughter and exertion, on the leather upholstered chesterfields, in what grim surroundings many of us were to hear again and thrill at that slogan.

The snooker players, wearied of the decorum of the billiard room, presently rejoined the remainder, and in five minutes Milsom, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, had them dancing to his music. I don't dance : but I leaned over the back of the piano, sucking my pipe and watching his smiling, half-mocking face as he swayed dreamily to the music that tinkled out from underneath his fingers. His eyes were puckered up in the smoke of the cigar he kept screwed into the corner of his mouth, and as he played I saw him watching with a queer inscrutable smile the dancers revolving round him, Majors, Captains and Subalterns, aye and a couple of Colonels, for Havelock and Markham were footing it with the best of them.

"This room has seen some good jamborees in its time, Hornby," he said after a while, speaking with

the butt end of the cigar between his teeth. "I dare say men have carried worse memories across the Line than their last night in the old Mess before they sailed." He changed into another air, an old-fashioned valse with a slow haunting melody; the Bostoners and bunnyhuggers checked and picked up the altered step. "I envy you going back to sea," he went on. "It's a good life, afloat. A clean life. . . . Better'n mucking about ashore with women. . . . But our turn'll come."

"You aren't due for sea yet, are you, Soj?" I asked.

"I ain't *due*," he said slowly, nodding his head to the melody. "The others ain't due, but they're going . . . some day. . . ."

"When are you going?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and again the tune changed:

"With me bundle on me shoulder

Sure there's no man could be bolder" . . .

He raised his voice in song, and the dancers took up the words till the great hall rang with men's voices:

"For I'm off to Philadelphia in the morning."

The player brought down his hands in a crash of bass chords and rose laughing, amid a storm of protest.

"No more. Fineesh. . . . Phew! It's a long ship, this."

76 An Awfully Big Adventure

Havelock approached us, glass in hand. "Milsom," he said, "I take that last song as an augury."

"Why?" asked Milsom, smiling.

"Well, my old governor—he was a Marine, you know—told me that they sang that on the last guest night before the *Birkenhead* sailed. The Marines didn't exactly disgrace themselves in the *Birkenhead*, and we'll hope your playing it to-night means the Corps are going to get another chance to show the sort of stuff they're made of."

It was the first time I'd heard the loss of the *Birkenhead* mentioned as other than a disaster: but that was Havelock's way of looking at things.

"They're doing that all day long," said Milsom, "but I'll add 'Amen!'"

4

We sailed two days later, and I did not see Milsom again before we left. He had walked part of the way back with me when, somewhere in the sma' hours, that hectic guest night drew to a close. We parted at the head of a dry dock, where a Light Cruiser was lying shored up in the midst of an abyss of shadows, and for a moment Milsom leaned over the guard rail and stared down the tiers of smooth masonry into the darkness beneath us.

"Hornby," he said, "I wish I had my mother's

clearness of vision. I feel somehow that you and I are on the eve of something—an awfully big adventure of sorts.

"I feel it now," went on Milsom, staring down into the dock with its flights of giant steps of granite, and speaking in a low voice. "It's a sort of—sort of pricking of the thumbs!" The beam of an inquisitive searchlight on one of the harbour defences swung round and for an instant dazzled us, painted the objects round us ebon and silver, and passed. Milsom straightened up. "Stonework and searchlights . . ." he said, as if repeating a half-forgotten lesson. "Stonework and searchlights and darkness beneath. . . . Oh, I wish I knew! I wish I knew!"

Then abruptly his mood changed. He broke into one of his delightful laughs, fetched his right hand out of his pocket and slapped me on the shoulder-blade. "Sleep well!" he cried. "Sleep tight—and don't let the bogies bite!"

That was the last I saw of him.

5

We had been back at the Grand Fleet Base nearly a fortnight, and leave had slipped into the limbo of the past. The usual after-effects of a spell at a dock-yard were beginning to be apparent: the married

78 An Awfully Big Adventure

men were cheering up and the bachelors were showing feverish interest in the mails. We had a racing cutter in training and a gunnery programme under way that Guns vowed was going to bring him in grey hairs and sorrow to the grave. Then one busy morning when I had mapped out a nice little programme for myself, the Boatswain and the Captain of the Side going round the ship in a skiff, the Skipper sent for me in the after-cabin.

"Hornby," he said, "what are your plans for the future?" I stared at him a bit. I'd only been promoted three years, and I wasn't worrying about a Command. I felt I was doing pretty good work where I was, and the ship, though perhaps I say it what shouldn't, didn't figure badly in the Squadron Returns. However, I decided he was contemplating a change of Commanders and was sorry, because he was a White Man.

"Plans, sir," I said. "I don't know that I have worried much about making plans. I believe in going where I'm sent and leaving it at that."

He nodded with his dry smile and picked up a telescope off his desk. "I know you won't think I'm butting into your private affairs, Hornby, or being inquisitive"—he focused the glass through a port on a distant cutter under sail—"but are you by any chance thinking of getting married again?"

"No," I said.

He closed the glass with a snap and faced me squarely. "Got any one dependent on you?"

I shook my head, wondering what on earth he was driving at.

"Well then, I won't beat about the bush any more. There's a certain operation in contemplation over the other side; a pretty desperate business as far as I can make out, and the odds against coming out of it alive are considerable. A Captain is wanted to command a certain unit of the force; are you on for it?"

"I'm on for it all right," I replied, "but I'm not a Captain."

"That's all right," said the Skipper. He looked at me a bit queerly. "I was dining with the Admiral last night and he hinted the nature of the business and asked me if I thought you'd do. I told him you would, but the thing is uncommonly like signing a very old friend's death warrant. However, if you pull through you'll not exactly lose by it."

I suddenly felt a most extraordinary elation, like a schoolboy promised an unexpected holiday.

"Can you give me any details, sir?" I asked. "Something to go on and make arrangements?"

The Owner shook his head, and sitting down at his desk pulled a signal pad towards him. "No," he said, "but I'll make a signal to the Admiral that you 'accept and he'll probably send for you in the course of the day." He rang the bell as he spoke and handed the signal to a messenger.

"Give that to the Yeoman of the Watch and tell

80 An Awfully Big Adventure

him to make it to 'Flag.' " Then he nodded to me. "That's all then, Commander. We'll leave it at that for the present."

"Aye, aye, sir," I replied, and so left him, feeling younger than I had felt for many a long day.

I hadn't long to wait for the summons from the Flagship. Barely an hour had elapsed before the Chief Yeoman stood in the doorway of my cabin. I was going through the Defaulters' List with the Master-at-Arms, I remember.

"Signal from Flag, sir," said the Chief Yeoman. "Admiral wishes to see Commander Hornby at once." He had evidently shown it to the Officer of the Watch *en route*, because as he spoke I heard the pipe of the Boatswain's Mate shrill along the upper deck, calling away the picket boat. I've noticed that when the gods elect to disturb the course of human destinies they don't dally long upon the road.

I had a surprise on the threshold of the Great Man's after cabin. The Flag Lieutenant ushered me in and left me on the mat with a murmured "Commander Hornby, sir."

The Admiral was standing with his back to the empty stove. Sitting on the arm of a chintz upholstered sofa, swinging his leg and smoking a cigarette through a foot-long amber holder, was no less a person than the Director of Naval Offensives, whom I, in common with the rest of the Navy,

imagined at that moment to be seated at his desk in a Whitehall office.

"Morning, Hornby," said the Admiral. "I've got your Captain's signal. Very glad to get it. Just cast your eye over that chart on the table."

From where I was standing I could see it was a big scale chart of the German coast. I crossed the cabin, and the Admiral, who was standing by the table, bent and placed his forefinger on a spot half way up the coast. "See that place, Hornby?"

"Yes," I said, "Angerbad. The new German destroyer and submarine base."

"That's it," said the man who spent his life watching it as a cat watches a mouse-hole. "We want you to block it. . . ."

I confess that caught me in the wind a bit.

The Director of Offensives chuckled and blew a cloud of smoke. "We'll help you, Hornby," he said. I think I flushed a bit. It was the cold insolence, the calculated madness of the thing that took away my breath.

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, and as I spoke I noted the red markings scattered about that section of the coast and clustering thick round the port of Angerbad till there was not an inch thus unadorned. Every mark was a German battery, and the guns ranged from 15 in. to 3-pounders or thereabouts.

"Just give him the outline of the thing," said the Admiral, and the Director of Offensives got down

82 An Awfully Big Adventure

from his perch and joined us at the table. With the mouthpiece of his cigarette holder he traced the course of the canal to where it debouches into the harbour.

Our conversation for the ensuing half-hour need not be recorded here. It was concerned with ways and means and a good deal of detail that was subsequently found impracticable or to require modification. But it wasn't very long before I realised the magnitude of the task ahead of us, and while he talked the Director of Offensives sat twisted on the side of the table, enveloped in cigarette smoke, talking in curt sentences that gave one insight enough into the icy, almost terrible, intelligence that lay behind his smooth forehead. The other occupant of the cabin spoke but little, pacing slowly to and fro with bent head, pausing every now and again to caress the great wolfhound that lay sprawled across the hearth and never took his eyes off his master.

At length, however, when the broad outlines of the plan had been unfolded, the Admiral halted in his walk.

"We'll give you an obsolete Cruiser to fit out for the job, and you'll run her alongside, disembark the assaulting parties, and bring them off again when the work's finished. It's a seaman's job, and we've picked you to do it."

"Thank you, sir," I said, and meant it.

"What about the officers and men?" he said.

"My pack want bleeding again. Got any suggestions?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I know of two I'd like to see there, and I'd like to take 'a Lieutenant called Thorogood as my First Lieutenant; I think I can answer for his willingness to come."

"Well, that can wait for the present," said the Director of Offensives. "We've got to get you South first of all and choose the ships. Then we'll find some men to put into 'em. We want a real Prince Rupert of a Marine to lead the storming party on the Mole, and some good subalterns——" He climbed stiffly off the table and threw away the stump of his cigarette. "Eh!" he said, "why ain't I twenty years younger! They didn't do these things when I was a boy!"

I heard the words, but my mind was far away in the corner of a southern dockyard at night, and as in a dream I heard Milsom's voice:

"Stonework and searchlights. . . . I wish I knew. . . . I *wish* I knew."

Ye Gods! Was *this* what the bogie in him was driving at?

"I'll wire to the Admiralty for your relief at once," said the Admiral, as I withdrew to return to my ship. "He'll be North in three days, and you can start in on this business."

And so I went out, past the motionless figure of the Marine sentry in the lobby, to begin an awfully big adventure.

84 An Awfully Big Adventure

6

I was sitting in my cabin after dinner writing up my night order book when Jakes pushed back the curtain and stepped inside. I believe in being accessible, and don't let people knock at my door.

"Hullo, Mouldy," I said, "what can I do for you?"

He was our Assistant Gunnery Lieutenant, and he was called Mouldy in the Wardroom on account of a silent sardonic manner he usually affected. Popularity is a mysterious thing; no man ever sought harder to avoid it or achieved it more readily than our silent "fathom of misery," as the First Lieutenant affectionately termed him. I think fellows in a Mess read character rather well and ignore externals. Anyhow, for all his dry cynicism, I knew Mouldy to have an absurdly tender heart, and to be as sensitive of soul as a soft-shelled egg. He stood with his cap under his arm and his hands joined in front of him, the fingers twisting.

"Speak to you for a minute, sir?" he mumbled. As a matter of fact, before he introduced the formula that signifies private affairs, I guessed at the first glance that Mouldy was in trouble of some sort. I nodded at the armchair.

"Take a sit-down, old lad," I said, "and have a cigarette; I shan't be a minute finishing this."

I had been too busy since we returned from leave

to pay much attention to affairs in the Mess. But I had observed that Mouldy never seemed to be about, and when he came to meals appeared even more taciturn and self-contained than his wont. I left him alone for a few minutes and then turned round. He was still standing before the door slowly twisting his fingers. I got a pipe and began scraping it out.

"Cough it up, Mouldy," I said.

He cleared his throat. "It's nothing much, sir," he replied, in a rather husky tone of forced detachment. "I—I just wanted to say that I thought I'd—er—rather like to leave the ship."

I said nothing, but went on scraping out my pipe.

"I don't feel I'm doing much good, sir, an' I thought I'd like to volunteer for a 'mystery ship,' or something with a bit of risk attached to it. I'd take on anything as long as there was some danger mixed up with it. I feel I'm growing moss and barnacles up here."

I didn't altogether like that. Mouldy was as brave as anyone I knew, but he was no adventurer by nature.

"Well," I said, "of course the Skipper'll send your name in if you want me to ask him, but I'd think it over for a bit if I were you."

"I've thought it over," was the reply. "I've done nothing else since I came back from sick leave." He made a little movement with his damaged hand. "And I—the fact is, sir, I can't stick it any longer."

86 An Awfully Big Adventure

There was a note in the old thing's voice that somehow wrung my heart. There was trouble here, and my imagination coursed wildly over fields of improbability. For an instant I thought of a woman, but dismissed the idea. The sort of women that Mouldy usually bestowed a fleeting affection upon were not the type to send a man looking for glory.

"Look here," I said, "we've known each other some years now. I'm not the man, as you've probably discovered, to butt into a fellow's private affairs or worm confidences out of anyone, but if you're in trouble of any sort, and it would help to get it off your chest——"

He hesitated for an instant, and in that moment he looked somehow pathetic; awfully young and boyish and in need of advice. "I'm a good deal older than you are, Mouldy," I went on, "and I've been through my own Valley of the Shadow in my time."

He took a long breath, and for a second I thought the floodgates were going to be loosed. Then the painful reserve and shyness of his nature closed on the impulse like a vice. "No, sir," he said, "no . . . thanks awfully. . . . I just wanted to get away . . . just that."

Whatever fox was gnawing under his shirt, he preferred to hold on to it rather than another eye should see his hurt. Well, I think I liked him all the better for it. I never found talking about my

trouble lightened it. It's a matter of temperament, I suppose.

"Right-o!" I said instantly. "I'll see what can be done. In fact I'll go further. I'll promise you all the change and danger and excitement you could possibly want." And with that I sent him to turn in.

7.

My relief turned up three days later, and that night they gave me a farewell dinner in the Wardroom. It was like all shows of the kind—a mixture of wild joviality and moments of sentiment, real or stimulated by the cup. I had to make a speech, of course, and altogether was not sorry when it was at last possible to escape to the Quarter Deck. I had given no reason for my abrupt departure from the ship, and I was conscious that I had succeeded in surrounding myself with a sort of glamour of mystery. Bunje (he was our First Lieutenant then) would have it that I was about to contract a matrimonial alliance with an exiled princess, and made a moving speech after dinner that was not in all its features fit for reproduction in these pages.

The Young Doctor stoutly maintained that I had decided to embrace Holy Orders, and insisted on borrowing the Padre's cassock to wear while he out-

88 An Awfully Big Adventure

lined my probable career as a missionary in the valley of the Yangtse-Kiang.

It was Thorogood who joined me on the Quarter Deck where I was finishing a final pipe before turning in, and he fell into step beside me, linking his arm in mine in the boyish, spontaneous manner in which his affectionate nature revealed itself.

"We'll miss you awfully, Commander," he said.

"You haven't seen the last of me yet, James," I replied.

"No," he answered, "but you're off to-morrow, aren't you? And God knows when I'll see you again."

"Hang it, why shouldn't I drop him a hint," I thought. If the flower of the Service was needed for this bloody business, then I'd choose Jimmy Thorogood amongst the bunch.

"James," I said, "would you care to come with me to my next job?"

He stopped short and stared at me through the darkness. "D'you mean it?" he cried. "By Jove! If I thought——"

"Listen," I said. "Its a business that wants thinking over. It's a pretty risky affair, and you are liable to get scuppered. The odds are a hundred to one on your being killed. I can't tell you any details at present, but think it over. You're not to tell a soul, and I'll write to you later and renew my offer. I shan't think you a coward if you refuse."

Upon my soul, at that moment I half hoped he would refuse. I was awfully fond of Jimmy Thoroughgood.

"My aunt!" he gasped, just as I had gasped in the Admiral's cabin in fact. "How perfectly *topping!* . . . I say, thanks awfully, sir!"

I left it at that.

8

For the next couple of months I was a busy man. I made my headquarters ashore, but they gave me a roving commission, and I spent a good deal of the time at the Admiralty and paid a lot of flying visits to Dockyard Ports. It would take too long to go into all that part of the business and describe our hunt round the scrap heaps of the Navy for just the craft we needed. I fixed on the old *Intolerant* for my share of the business, and I shan't forget the thrill with which I first saw her, black against the sunset one evening, lying at her rusty moorings on the Motherbank. For the three blockships we selected the three obsolete Cruisers of the "D" class: *Daring*, *Dauntless*, and *Determination*, and presently their Captains arrived down from the North in obedience to a telegram from the Director of Offensives. They invaded my diggings at the Base one forenoon, tumbling out of a rickety four-wheeler, burdened with

90 An Awfully Big Adventure

rugs and suitcases, all jabbering at once; James Thorogood, a contemporary of his called Glegg, and another Lieutenant-Commander I didn't know, named Brakespear. They were in the highest spirits and loudly demanded food. I fed them and gave them drink, and finally, when they had their pipes alight and were sprawling at their ease, I unfolded what lay ahead. Of course, they had an inkling—in fact, they had to be told a certain amount when they were asked to volunteer. But they wanted details now, and what I told them ought to have sobered a circus. Instead of which, Glegg danced a war dance, and Thorogood solemnly stood on his head in a corner of the sofa, while Brakespear flung cushions at him and scared the landlady's cat to the verge of delirium.

It was the next day that I learned for the first time who was to lead the Marines' storming party on to the Mole from the deck of the old *Intolerant*. I received a telephone message from the Director of Offensives that he wanted to see me, and accordingly I went to town and reached his office about noon. There, studying a roll of aerial photographs through a magnifying glass at the Admiral's side, was Milsom. I somehow felt no surprise, but he raised his eyebrows and smiled in his half-mocking whimsical way.

"You know each other?" said the Admiral. "That's all right. Now what about the demolition party. We want a Lieutenant-Commander for that;

a Gunnery man for preference. Any suggestions, Hornby?"

"Yes," I said. "Lieutenant-Commander Jakes." I named my old ship.

He nodded. "Send for him and let me see him. In the meanwhile you two had better go and have a Council of War. It wouldn't be a bad plan if you went down and looked at the *Intolerant* together. They've started work on her, and as soon as the living quarters are ready, you, Hornby, can take up your quarters on board. Milsom won't need to for some time yet." He turned to the Marine. "You can pick your men and start in a preliminary training ashore. No need to be uncomfortable till you've got to! By the way, if you are going down to see the *Intolerant* you can take a letter for me to the Commander-in-Chief. Just wait while I dictate a few lines."

He pressed a button on his desk, and I carried a couple of the photographs to the window to get a better light. They were photographs of Angerbad, obtained by our aircraft the previous day, and I studied them with considerable interest. The weather had been bad for reconnaissance of late, and the most recent photographs I had seen previously were taken ten days before. I don't think I heard the door open, but I did hear Milsom give a funny little gasp behind me, and I turned to see a girl standing in the doorway. The light was full in her face, and my heart gave the most unaccountable jump. I suppose it was astonish-

92 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

ment, because the new-comer was the girl who had travelled with us in the train returning from leave—what now seemed centuries ago. She didn't appear to see me, but her eyes, with their curious concentrated gaze, were levelled on Milsom. She stood quite motionless for a moment, and I realised for the first time that she was very tall. I am not a short man, and her startled eyes were level with mine. A little half-smile of recognition passed over her face. Then, with a slight inclination of her graceful head, she slipped into a chair, with pencil poised and notebook on her knee. The Director, deep in papers that strewed his desk, dictated a note, smoked half a cigarette while it was being typed, and signed it. As the girl was leaving the room he said: "By the way, Miss Mayne—Captain Hornby—Colonel Milsom." The girl bowed, but Milsom stepped forward. "We've met before," he said, and held out his hand.

"Yes," said Miss Mayne. A faint colour came into her pale face. She gave him one searching, half-puzzled look (just such another glance as I intercepted in the railway carriage), and quietly left the room.

9

Some day I hope a better man than I will write the story of that grim preparation with its hours of heart-breaking labour; its disappointments and anticipations, the close, almost affectionate, intimacy between

officers and men. "Eat, drink, and be merry" was the motto of the Force, and those who know the sailor-man's lightheartedness and cheerful oblivion to the things of the morrow will realise, with a morrow as uncertain as ours, how care-free was to-day. As a psychological study it must have presented strange and interesting sidelights. We only had one punishment—a threat of dismissal from the Force; and I vow that the dread of the cat in the Navy of old never produced such a state of discipline as ruled on board those ancient crowded ships.

I got a First Lieutenant appointed, a lad called Jervis, who, immediately on joining, decided that his rôle required of him that he should grow a beard with all speed; as a facial adornment it was not a success, but regarded as a terrifying war-mask it left little to be desired. He was a laughable, lovable soul, a regular soda-water bottle of fizzing spirits and optimism, and the men worshipped him. Selby was our Navigator, a dry, thoughtful old stick, with eyes that always seemed full of memories that clung like sheep's wool along a bramble hedge. He was one of those men you never get to know thoroughly, yet who never make you conscious they are keeping you at arm's length. It's a type the Navy breeds prolifically. Never knowing privacy from earliest youth onwards has a good deal to do with it.

In all the preliminary fitting out, however, the men who really slaved and on whom so much of the final success depended were Shorty Casseen, our

94 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

Engineer-Lieutenant-Commander, and the Gunnery Lieutenant, Teigne. The former found a scrap heap, and converted it into a set of engines that was not only to be relied upon to take the ship to Angerbad, but we rather hoped would also bring her back after an almighty hammering. I've often wondered why he volunteered for the job : he had a little wife he adored and two bonny kids. But he came, and he lived through it, bless him.

"Guns" (Teigne) was one of those gunnery enthusiasts who make you wonder what profession he'd have chosen if no one had discovered gunpowder. He saw the world through telescopic sights, I believe, and is reputed, on first seeing the large hôtel that was a prominent landmark near where we were then anchored, to have muttered longingly : "My aunt ! What a target !"

Of course, as the time drew near, and we had rehearsed and drilled to the last gasp of preparedness, others were added to the complement. We had a Padre, a bullet-headed athlete, who before the war was the parson of a roaring miners' camp in the North. Not the wife-beater's terror of the Sunday periodicals to look at, though—a quiet, friendly little chap, with a way of blinking when he talked, as though the sun was in his eyes. But one night in the Mess when we were having a scrap to keep our spirits up and help our digestions, he picked me up and threw my twelve stone about like a rag doll.

Jock Macrae was our P.M.O., with two assistants

fresh from some hospital. For a man who was no despiser of whisky he had the most iron nerve and steadiest hand of any "butcher" I've met. I have wondered since how many torn and bloody bundles of humanity owe their lives to his imperturbable pluck and skill. He brought a banjo with him, and night after night he would sit cross-legged on the deck, plucking at the catgut with those long surgical fingers of his, and sing old Jacobean ballads to the moon.

The blockships were moored not far away from us, and we organised concerts and dinners that will always remain vivid in my memory as the gayest entertainments of the kind I have ever participated in.

I saw little of Mouldy or Milsom during the training period. The former was coaching his braves in the gentle art of demolishing things ashore at the Base, and the latter was at Headquarters introducing his band of warriors to the inner mysteries of bomb-throwing, flame projecting, and similar cults. Once or twice I went over to confer with them separately, and found that, by a curious succession of accidents, they had never met each other.

"Went over twice to see that Marine bloke," grumbled Mouldy, seated on a case of explosives and measuring off some fuse, "and blowed if he wasn't in Town each time, havin' a frolic; an' here are we sweatin' our guts out. . ." He launched into a brief description of the activities of his disciples during the past month.

96 An Awfully Big Adventure

Milsom had a similar grievance. "What's the bird's name—the demobilisation expert?" he inquired. "Jakes? Well, I went over to look him up t'other day; I've never met him, and I thought that, as we were going over the bags together, we might meet and have a chin-wag. Of course, the day I chose to toil over to the Base he had gone afloat to try some experiments somewhere, so I came back none the wiser."

"You'll meet as soon as they transfer the forces on board us," I said.

I saw Milsom once more before they all took up their quarters on board. It was in Town, and I had gone up for the last time to set a few private affairs straight. I don't worry my solicitor much, and I think he was genuinely concerned at my "clewing up" my affairs so thoroughly. Anyhow, when the business was over he insisted on taking me to lunch "somewhere cheerful," as he put it. He thought, I suppose, that I was getting morbid.

We lunched at a large crowded restaurant full of red-tabbed soldiers and pretty women smoking cigarettes. I'd rather have gone to the club, but old Addison was all for this place. "Brighten you up, my boy," he said, pouring out the champagne. It was at that moment I saw Milsom. It wasn't so much seeing him there that surprised me as the glimpse I got of his companion's profile. It was Miss Mayne, and judging by the angle at which

Milsom's head was inclined towards her, and the grave intentness with which she was listening to what he had to say, they appeared to know each other pretty well. They had finished luncheon, and she was aimlessly stirring her untasted coffee and answering Milsom in rare monosyllables, her eyes on her cup. Altogether, they didn't appear to be having a particularly gay time, and in a little while they rose and threaded their way side by side out of the babbling overheated room and were lost to view.

10

I had completed everything I came up to London to do by 4 P.M., and found on looking up a timetable at the club that I had just time to get to the station and catch a train back to the Base. I got to the terminus with a few minutes to spare, and on going to the bookstall to buy something to read I saw a familiar figure standing beside the stall turning the pages of a magazine. It was a Commander of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, a tough old yachtsman called Armitage. I did not know him well, but I had heard a good deal about him from Thorogood. He was well over fifty and was, I believe, a very rich man. Yet he spent the first three years of the war slamming about in the North Sea, and he was now stationed at the Base in charge of the Armed Motor Launches.

98 An Awfully Big Adventure

He nodded a greeting at me and gathered a bundle of papers. "Going down by this train?" he said. "Let's find a carriage together. I'd like to have a yarn with you."

As luck would have it, we got a carriage to ourselves, and after we had started and Armitage had got a gigantic bulldog pipe in full blast, he broached the topic that was uppermost in the minds of all of us those days.

"It's this blockship business that's been worrying me," he said. "Even with the crews cut down to the bare minimum and disembarking surplus steaming parties before they get across, there'll be an awful lot of men on board when they sink themselves."

"Yes," I said; "but they've got boats. They'll just have to pull across the harbour under cover of your smoke screen"—the motor launches were detailed to lay the smoke screen inshore—"and the Destroyers will pick up the boats outside."

Armitage nodded and puffed his enormous pipe. "That's all right as long as the wind holds. But supposing the wind shifts and blows the harbour clear of smoke?"

I was silent. We all knew there was a possibility of such a thing happening, but that had been taken into consideration by the gallant lads who had volunteered for the job.

"I saw the Admiral this morning," continued

Armitage, "after talking it over with some of my boys. I told him six motor launches would volunteer to go inside the harbour and bring off the block-ships' crews."

I stared at him. "But . . ." I said, "have you seen the photographs of the place? There's a machine-gun about every two yards round the harbour, to say nothing of any destroyers there may be moored alongside the Mole. You'll get smothered with gunfire at point-blank range before the block-ships are abandoned."

"Oh!" he said, "I'm not making out it's a joy-ride. Thirty years ago I might have laughed at it. Remember," he said, pointing the stem of his pipe at me. "I'm not making a proposal that I'm not going to see through myself. I'm going to lead the boats in. But I feel that it would be wrong not to have a try at saving some of those gallant children's lives. Why," he went on, "I might have had a son there——" He broke off and was silent for a moment, puffing hard as if he were laying one of his own defensive smoke screens.

"We're the R.N.V.R.," he said. "Remember that. We want to show the Navy what we're good for. The R.N.V.R.!" he repeated. "Lord! I could tell you tales of the old days. The *Buzzard*——" He laughed, a little hard laugh without any mirth in it.

We were silent for a while after that. My brain was busy with this new development of the affair,

100 An Awfully Big Adventure

and I was beginning to see all manner of heroic possibilities in the proposal.

“When a man gets to my age,” continued Armitage presently, “he sees things more clearly somehow—the things that matter and things that don’t. You get down to bedrock. Money! I know something about *that* commodity, and just how much happiness you can buy with it.” He made a little movement with an empty hand. “Hope makes for two-thirds of the happiness of life: hoping for something you believe God’ll be good enough to give you—something you think you’ve lived clean enough to earn. Maybe you get it, maybe you don’t. But you just go on hoping something, you know.” He looked at me with patient, steadfast eyes. “I want to be of some use to somebody before my number goes up. And if I bring back to his lover some boy who might otherwise have been buried by a German funeral party, perhaps I shan’t altogether have lived in vain.

“A little hope that when we die
We reap our sowing, so—good-bye!”

he quoted, smiling. And I thought his smile was as pathetic as his words.

11

The storming and demolition parties came on board one lovely sunny morning—the sort of day that makes you want to forget there’s a war. They were

two of the finest bodies of men I've ever set eyes upon, and as I watched them disencumbering themselves of their arms and accoutrements along the upper deck, laughing and joking among themselves, it occurred to me that if blood must be the price of Admiralty, we were going to pay full measure of our best.

We had a sort of informal Council of War in the Wardroom during the morning, and the Mess was crowded to the limits of its capacity with Subalterns and Lieutenants, smoking and talking nineteen to the dozen. Into that Dutch Parliament presently strolled Mouldy Jakes, and stood a moment in the doorway. "My word," he ejaculated, "who wouldn't sell his little farm and go to sea—eh, boys? Anybody got a drink to give the Officer in Charge of the demolition party?" Someone handed him a cocktail and his lugubrious face brightened. It then occurred to me that he and Milsom had not yet met, and I rose from my seat on the edge of the table to find the latter in the crowd. I discovered him standing upright by the door staring at Mouldy with one of his odd, inscrutable smiles, and it struck me, I remember, that he looked unusually white. I introduced him and left him yarning over a drink.

We half expected to get our eagerly awaited signal that night. The factors of weather, wind and sea and visibility on which the whole business depended were favourable enough at noon. Every

102 An Awfully Big Adventure

soul committed to the venture was aboard and the motley force was assembled with steam raised. Somewhere to the northward of us I knew the supporting forces, big ships, destroyers, motor launches, and coastal motor boats were fretting at the leash, and then, just when our hopes were at their highest, the wind veered and a nasty sea got up. We banked our fires for the night, and for the first time for many a long day we found we had leisure to think and talk of other things. I remember walking up and down the bridge that night in the windy darkness with the sparks flying from my pipe, and wondering what Beth thought about it all, and whether she was glad. . . . And presently a form loomed up out of the darkness and Milsom fell into step beside me. I had left him playing poker in the Wardroom, and was rather surprised to see him. We paced up and down in silence for a while, and I knew and liked him so well that he hardly interrupted my train of thought.

"Bill," he said presently, "this is going to be a hell of a scrap. I thought the Lancashire Landing was warm work, but I guess this'll knock it silly."

I grunted assent, and for a while he went on to talk about the show; how he and Mouldy were going to lead two rushes simultaneously, and his dispositions for his machine-gun sections and bombing parties, and while he talked his cigar glowed red in the darkness. As I've said, I was rather a long way

off in my thoughts and wasn't listening to him properly.

". . . And we'll light such a candle, Master Ridley, as by God's Grace——" he broke off, soberly. Down in the forecastle a gramophone was humming the refrain of a popular song, and the sound floated up to us on the wind. It was somehow familiar to me, and I connected it with laughter and women's voices. . . . Somewhere aft a soda-water bottle popped as the cork was drawn. I remembered then. The orchestra had been playing it the day I lunched with Addison at that restaurant and I'd seen Milsom. . . . The incident had gone clean out of my mind.

"By the way," I said, "I forgot till this minute, but something's reminded me; that girl we travelled up with in the train that day—Miss Mayne?"

"Yes," said Milsom; "what about her?"

"I didn't know you knew her."

Milsom had got out of step; he shuffled his feet and picked it up again before replying.

"Didn't you?" he said, and glanced sideways at me. "Yes," he went on, after a pause, "we got to know each other rather well. But how did you——"

I told him about the luncheon at that restaurant, and how I had seen them. "Soj," I said, "did you ever ask her who that—that fellow was?"

Milsom was silent for a moment. "No," he replied presently. "I never asked her what his name

104 An Awfully Big Adventure

was." We walked the length of the bridge before he spoke again. "She told me the story, though; rather a pitiful little tale. She was a governess, it seems. No people: orphan. Very little money, and what there was she gave to an only brother to keep him in the Guards. Father's old regiment, don't you know. Brother was killed and she eventually learned shorthand and took on that job at the Admiralty. Thought she ought to do war work. But it was while she was a governess she met this—er—naval officer, somewhere in the country."

"Naval officer, was he?" I interrupted.

"Yes, and she—I think she got fond of him. . . . and she thought he cared for her . . . but they had a row. . . . It sounds as if he was that sort of fellow who *would* make a mess of it. Anyhow, he mucked up the whole business and went back to sea and never wrote again . . . or anything." Milsom pitched the glowing stump of his cigar overboard. "And he'll never have her now." There was a hard note in my companion's voice I'd never heard there before.

I reflected. "But," I said, "couldn't you find out his name? If it was only a silly misunderstanding between two kids, we might have helped."

"He wasn't a kid." Milsom halted at the head of the ladder. "And as to helping him, . . . I don't know that I wanted to—particularly," and with that he descended the ladder, leaving me staring after him in the darkness.

Hopes ran high with the rising of the sun next morning. The wind was light and steady, and the sea, as the morning wore on, grew calm as a mill pond.

About noon the signal came through, and by five o'clock we were aweigh.

It is difficult now, after all the momentous happenings of the ensuing twelve hours, to recapture precisely one's sensations as we sighted the escorting Destroyers and Motor Launches sweeping down to meet us, and forming up on either wing as our little column, *Intolerant*, *Daring*, *Dauntless*, and *Determination*, fell into line ahead. A squadron of 'planes hummed overhead, searching the sky for signs of inquisitive aircraft, and louder than that resonant sound was the deep drone of men's voices on the decks below, talking amongst themselves. We were committed at last to the bravest adventure that ever caused a man to tighten his girths and roll up the sleeve of his sword arm, and as I looked up from the binnacle, across the broad expanse of water, and saw that doughty array spread out beneath the afternoon sunlight, I thought that a man might choose worse company than this in which to fight his last fight. Shorty Casseen came up presently and stood beside me whistling a little tune between his teeth.

"How are the bulgines heaving round, old lad?" I asked.

106 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Fine," he replied. "She's going as well as she did when I was an Engineer-Sub and tinkered that scrap-heap through a Commission in the Pacific. But don't you worry, sir," he said, with one of his bird-like sidelong glances, "we'll get the old hooker alongside that Mole if the bottom drops out of her."

In so saying, I think he somehow voiced the feeling that was predominant in all our hearts.

The Padre held a sort of informal service later, on the upper deck, which was attended by all who could be spared from their duties. The light was fading from the sky, and the violet shadows of evening were closing in on us. The men's faces, as they stood bareheaded and intent upon his words, were whitely visible from the bridge.

The attack was timed for midnight but it was half an hour before that when we saw the first gleam of star-shell that betrayed an apprehensive spirit amongst the Boches. Our Coastal Motor Boats and Motor Launches had been at work some time, and were weaving their curtains of artificial fog to and fro across the harbour mouth. We heard the occasional distant boom of a gun, but nothing that betokened a bombardment or that the enemy had any real inkling of what was afoot. One by one we picked up the mark buoys that had been laid since dark by the dauntless C.M.B.'s.

The moments passed, and the tension grew with every muffled throb of the engines. The batteries

were crowded with silent men, and the starlight gleamed on their steel helmets and here and there a naked bayonet. Somewhere in front of those densely packed ranks were Milsom and his six Subalterns and Mouldy Jakes, his impassive features hidden by a gas mask. He had donned it some time previously, and persisted in wearing it "as a type of English beauty," he said, and shook hands in silence before he went to his post. Milsom and I had a few words outside the flame-thrower's hut a little while after that.

"I knew of this show before you did, Hornby," he said laughingly, as he broke open a packet of revolver ammunition. "D'you remember that night in the Dockyard when we said good night?"

"Yes," I said. "'Stonework and searchlights.'"

"That's it. It puzzled me at the time, but I'll know all about it in a little while. And the rest——" He shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell? It's written somewhere, I suppose?"

"Nor all thy piety and wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

"Well, I'll send a Boche or two ahead of me to pipe the side before I step over it. And if I come back"—he gave one of his reckless devil-may-care laughs (the laugh I once heard him give when he flung his last louis on the table at Monte Carlo)—"faith, Bill, you shall foot it at my wedding. . . ."

108 An Awfully Big Adventure

He turned abruptly on his heel, and as he strode away I heard him humming :

“Wid me bundle on me shoulder,
Sure there’s no man could be bolder. . . .”

At the prearranged point we shifted from the bridge; the Navigator and Quartermaster moved into the conning tower, and I took up my position in the port flame-thrower’s hut from where I conned the ship. I had previously been round the gun and howitzer positions, and exchanged a few words with the waiting officers and men, and as I passed from one motionless group to the other my heart swelled with pride and love for them. There wasn’t an anxious face or a wavering eye. Broad grins and whispered jests, like children waiting for the curtain to go up at a pantomime; and among the Marines grouped in the rear of each brow some whispered catchword of Milsom’s was rife.

“ ’Urry up there, please ! Step smartly, plenty of room in the front. . . .”

Gallant, gallant lads ! And astern of us in the quiet darkness lay England—England lighting its candles and going to bed ; England bending over cradles ; and here and there, beside some open window that looked out to the sea, perhaps some English girl kneeling and praying as she never prayed before.

A guttering smoke buoy went down our port side, and the next moment we were enveloped in the arti-

ficial fog of our own making. We had parted company from the Destroyers some minutes before, and the blockships had swerved aside to make the entrance. Then, as I stood with my hand on the key of the fire gongs, peering ahead into the swirling murk, I felt a breath of damp air blow strong in my face. The wind had changed and was rolling back our fog on top of us. Like magic I saw a space of water clear ahead, and the next instant the Mole stood out black and distinct a couple of cables away, limned against the glare of searchlights and star shell.

There was a blinding yellow flash—it seemed on top of us; and that instant, as the old ship answered to her helm, hell was unloosed.

Every gun and howitzer on board opened fire with a roar that shook the ship from bridge to keel. The machine-guns in the top broke into a hysterical chatter, and all along the Mole bursts of flame belched forth. The shrapnel was spattering about the upperworks like hailstones, and as I got the bows round, heading for the Mole, I felt the ship check and shudder as a heavy shell struck her. Another burst aft and again another; they must have struck us in the battery where all those men were waiting, and try as I would I could not shut out of my consciousness the thought of the carnage that they must have caused. The foremost howitzer gun's crew were lying in heaps round the gun, and as they rolled over fresh men came running and stumbling over the

110 An Awfully Big Adventure

dead to take their places. The tide was flooding strong, and the ground swell of yesterday's breeze broke ominously against the stonework. The ship lifted her bows to it, and plunging and scending, we grated alongside. I left the shelter of the hut then and got out on to the bridge to superintend the placing of the grappling anchors. Three of the brows were out, rising and falling above the parapet of the Mole as the ship lurched in the swell; at one moment they were six feet above the level of the stonework, the next they were striking it with a shuddering jar. And as I watched I saw Milsom and Mouldy go lurching out along them with their men at their heels. A dazzling star shell lit the scene like day, and I saw Milsom stoop and vault a clear drop of six feet, turn and catch a burly Marine in his arms, and rush forward to help secure the grappling anchor. They had got another brow out by now, and men were pouring over it with scaling ladders. The din surpassed all description. The almost ceaseless roar of guns, the grinding and crash of the brows, the sob of the waves as they broke against the pier, flinging the spray high, and ever and anon the explosion of shrapnel overhead spattering their deadly hail broadcast. Our monitors and aircraft were busy, too, and ashore the tall flames of a score of great conflagrations leaped into the sky.

It must be explained that the outer pathway along the top of the Mole was about six feet wide. Then came a drop of 30 feet on to the Mole itself,

and once they passed over into this abyss both storming and demolition parties were lost to view. They took ladders for the purposes of this descent, and the sight of those reeling brows a-swarm with men, laden as they were with these ladders, flame-throwers, machine-guns, bombs, cutlasses, and demolition implements, will always haunt me. They dropped like flies, to lie where they fell, dangling across the narrow gangways or clinging piteously for a moment ere they let go and slipped into oblivion. The forecastle was just a battered heap of dead and shattered wreckage, and aft along the batteries I saw Jock Macrae's assistants bending among the motionless heaps and rushing the wounded below.

The Pilot joined me after a while, and together we watched the blockships pass through the entrance a few cables away, vomiting flashes and spurts of heavy and machine-gun fire. How they got across that harbour, lit like day by searchlights, whipped into a sheet of foam by shrapnel and machine-gun fire, only God and their Captains know. We saw Jimmy Thorogood in the *Dauntless* go crashing through the flimsy anti-submarine defences, and I believe we gave him a crazy, cracked cheer. They were plastering him with gas shell, and he was on fire aft and blazing like a hay-rick. But he held on and made the entrance to the Canal, and was lost to view behind some sheds. *Daring* came next, and *Determination*, trailing in the rear and almost hidden

112 An Awfully Big Adventure

by waterspouts of falling shell. And then Selby gripped my arm and pointed to the foremost brow. Our Padre was lurching along it with splinters flying all round him, looking for all the world like a tightrope walker learning his profession. He reached the Mole intact, and stood looking about him. Then suddenly bending down, he swung the unconscious form of a giant Marine over his shoulder, and carrying him thus, turned and retraced his steps. Other matters claimed my attention for the moment, but when I next looked along the ship's side I saw him returning with another precious human freight slung on his back.

It was impossible to tell what was going on along the causeway below the parapet of the Mole. Twice with a deafening concussion a great sheet of flame leaped into the air, and I came to the conclusion that Mouldy's merry men had "touched off" something. It was afterwards, when we came to piece together the breathless narratives of those who returned, that we, whose business it was only to stand and wait, learned something of that desperate hand-to-hand fighting; of the rushing and bombing of the machine-guns and a Destroyer alongside; the destruction of the seaplane sheds; and the yelling bayonet charge Milsom led against the angry reinforcements of the Huns.

From where I stood I could see the whole panorama of the harbour in that unearthly light. I saw

the blockships lying athwart in the entrance to the Canal, blocking it effectually; I saw the Motor Launches, led by old Armitage, dashing through that hellish barrage of machine-gun fire and pom-poms, and run alongside to embark the crews, turn and race blindly for the harbour mouth and safety; and then, when the last was clear, our work was done.

I seized the lanyard of the syren and tugged it, and shrill above the ceaseless uproar rose the hoot of the "Recall."

According to the arrangements we had made beforehand, the demolition party retired first, while the Marines covered the retreat, and no sooner had the first reluctant figures begun to struggle back across the shattered brows than the enemy concentrated every gun he could bring to bear upon the crowded scaling ladders and the gangways.

Fountains of flame and sparks flew skywards, through which the forms of men came stumbling, each living figure that reached our deck, it seemed to me, the embodiment of a miracle. The planking flew about me as chips fly from a woodman's axe. My cap was torn from my head, my monkey-jacket was ripped and scorched, but there wasn't a scratch on my body that I was conscious of.

I saw my First Lieutenant forward busy about the slip of the cable; I saw the top above me shattered by a shell, and after a silence heard the pom-

114 An Awfully Big Adventure

pom there break out again undismayed. The upper deck was a reeking shambles, with men pouring down into it from the Mole, exhausted, bloody, and triumphant. Nearly every man carried a wounded mate slung across his back, and most of them had a chunk of masonry or a fragment of shell gripped in his fist to bring back as a "souvenir" of the night's work—as if their memories or those of their children's children needed any such reminder.

The Marines fell back at length, and the last to embark was Milsom, one arm hanging limp and bloody. He laughed as he saw me.

"Thank God you're all right," he panted.

"Ditto," I shouted.

"The Devil looks after his own," he said, and then the business of getting clear claimed all my attention.

We got out of range of their batteries, and the last fire on board extinguished before we stopped to transfer our wounded to some of the Destroyers, to be rushed back to the Base. A battered Motor Launch came alongside and I recognised the number painted on her bows. It was Armitage's boat. I went to the gangway and hailed her. A Volunteer Reserve Sub. with a bandage round his smoke-begrimed face, standing by the wheel, raised his arm.

"Armitage?" I shouted. The boy shook his head and climbed inboard. They were passing the wounded down to be transferred to one of the Destroyers laying off.

Comr. Hornby's Narrative 115

"Where is he?" I asked. The youngster jerked his thumb towards the launch's tiny cabin. "Aft," he said, in the dull tone of utter exhaustion of body and emotions.

"Five times he was hit an' he wouldn't budge. . . . Kneeling in a pool of blood for'ard givin' directions. . . . Got the last man from *Determination* aboard and he said 'Finish,' and rolled over in a heap. Just that one word, 'Finish.'" The dead man's second in command stood with his face working. "Oh, God!" he said; "he was a man, he *was* a man!"

We resumed our voyage with four Destroyers to screen us, and the dawn broke chill and wan; a mist closed down upon us like a pall as the light strengthened.

Jervis was below having a wounded eye dressed and I was alone, but for the Quartermaster, on the wreckage of the bridge; but presently I saw Milsom, with a bandaged arm in splints and a cigar stuck truculently in the corner of his mouth, climbing stiffly up the ladder.

"Jakes is all right," he said, as he joined me beside the rail.

"Yes," I said. "Hasn't got a scratch. Only got a sniff of gas—but he'll shake that off in a few hours. The Destroyers say that those Motor Launches saved all the officers and most of the men from the block-ships. How's the arm?"

"Bit stiff. Broken in two places." Milsom

116 An Awfully Big Adventure

leaned against the rail and took a deep breath. "But I'm still alive." He repeated the sentence and stared at the dim outline of one of our escort just visible through the mist. His tone was like that of a man awakening from sleep. "Oh, damn it!" he said. "No, no," . . . and then he turned abruptly and faced me. "Look here, Bill," he said, "I was going to play the rottenest trick a man ever was tempted to stoop to." He was talking as if he was in a desperate hurry, the words coming in a rush. "This is a funny time to tell a love story, in all conscience, but I—I—d'you remember that girl, Miss Mayne? I've never looked at a woman in my life till I saw her. She wasn't in love with me, but I made her say she'd marry me. . . .

"Oh, I understand her, Bill, as no other man alive could. . . . I tell you, I could read every thought that was in her head—and knowing that, I was going to take her. I told myself I had every right to if I could, and she was mine—just made for me, body and mind and soul. I'm telling you this now—you've never heard me talk like this before, Bill; and God knows you never will again. . . . Don't stare like that, old thing. I'm not light-headed—I'm telling you all this, because I—I know who the other man is. You've got to help him find her again and patch up their silly squabble and make her happy—happier than ever I could. And I understood her better five minutes after I'd first set eyes on her than he will with her lying in his arms——"

Somewhere at the back of my brain I heard a far-off drone like the sound of a distant beehive.

"Well," I said. "What's his name?"

Milsom stood staring past me into the mist that lowered over us.

"I'll tell you," he said, "because I——"

The events of the next few seconds will always remain a blur in my memory; the bark of a high-angle gun from one of the Destroyers astern cut short his words. The drone above us seemed suddenly to become a rushing roar of sound, and a blast of machine-gun fire swept the deck and bridge as a flight of seaplanes whizzed overhead flying low, so that I could see the goggled faces of the pilots behind the spurts of flame from their guns. The next instant they were gone again in the mist. It was the last sting from the hornets' nest we had been burning out, and Milsom was at my feet leaning on his one arm and staring stupidly at the thin dark stream trickling across the planking. The Destroyers on our beam were firing fruitlessly into the mist.

I bent and put my arms about him and he turned his face towards me. Twice he tried to speak, and an attempt at a smile, a ghost of the old jaunty smile, flitted across his grey face. He made one more supreme effort, and with my ear to the bloody lips I just caught the last whispered breath that took his soul with it.

118 An Awfully Big Adventure

13

We passed up harbour to our berth alongside the following afternoon, and every craft in harbour manned ship and gave us a cheer while the tugs and ferry craft hooted, and the folk ashore lined the beach and waved flags and handkerchiefs. I am not ashamed to own that I saw it all through a blur; and as the off-shore wind carried the thin sound of women's voices, I couldn't help thinking of the lads below the shattered upper deck, who had fallen asleep that England on the morrow might wake to a fuller realisation of her glory.

We dined together that night in the coffee room of the big hotel that had been converted into the Naval Headquarters of the Base. We had counted on having a tremendous jamboree—those of us who returned. But somehow the feeling that predominated was a sort of dazed astonishment that we were still alive. And our heads ached "fit to split" as housemaids say.

Mouldy was in bed, recovering from a slight gassing, but Thorogood sat next to me, squeezing my arm at intervals as if to reassure himself that he wasn't dreaming; and on the other a big subaltern of Marines who seemed to regard his recent experiences with less emotion than the last Army v. Navy rugger match, in which I saw him play. Glegg was there with a bandage over one eye, but Brakespear

Comr. Hornby's Narrative 119

was in hospital with a piece of shrapnel somewhere in his anatomy.

Jervis had shorn his beard, and in the process seemed to have parted with something of his effervescent vivacity, and when I remembered him as I had last seen him, as we shoved off from the blazing Mole, stumbling amid the dead and bawling through his megaphone. . . . No, we weren't feeling gay.

It was after dinner that we got really talking. There must have been a dozen of us altogether, because Shorty had gone home to his wife, and Selby had gone Home too: a longer journey, but perhaps an even happier meeting at the end of it. . . . Anyhow, there were about a dozen of us that lit cigars and cigarettes and put our elbows on the table, and the scene, as I remember it, was just like some big family happily reunited, with the shadow of the Angel's wing still hovering over all.

Messengers were coming and going all the while with signals and telegrams, and presently the orderly murmured, "The Director of Offensives, sir, wants to talk to you on the telephone."

I went up to the room I used as an office when ashore, and as I picked up the receiver of the Admiralty line, heard the Director's voice faintly, speaking not to me but to someone in his room.

"Tell them I'll be at the War Office at 3 P.M. for that meeting . . . that's all for to-night, Miss Mayne,"

120 An Awfully Big Adventure

I heard him say. Then clearer and louder, "Hallo, that you, Hornby?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Well, I'm damned glad to hear it." Then he said a lot of nice things about what we'd done and being proud of us, and finished off: "Well, I'd like to see you at 3.30 P.M. to-morrow if you can get to town by then."

"Aye, aye, sir," and as I answered a thought flashed through my brain: it was one of those brilliant inspirations that come once in a lifetime, and in the course of a sleepless night (none of us slept that night) I perfected it into a piece of strategy for which I claim, in all modesty, a place in this already unduly prolonged narrative.

Mouldy occupied a spare room at my diggings where most of us were billeted for the night, and when I turned out the following morning, I visited him. I found him drinking tea and reading the morning paper.

"How d'you feel?" I asked.

He pointed to a tin of cigarettes with a wry face.

"Dead off baccy," he said lugubriously.

"Well," I replied, "that'll do you no harm. All right otherwise?"

He nodded. "All right last night. Lord knows why I should have been rammed into bed while all you pirates lapped up bubbly and made a night of it."

Comr. Hornby's Narrative 121

"Doctor's orders. Anyhow, he says you can go to town to-day."

Mouldy sat up. "Damn good of him, 'cos I was goin', anyhow. I'm going to have a hell of a jam-boree." He blinked at me defiantly from under a lank lock of black hair.

"You've got to come with me to the Admiralty at three o'clock," I said as sternly as I could. Mouldy groaned.

"Have I got to keep sober till three—an' pubs closing at half-past two?"

"Yes," I said. "You won't have a drink till the evening—and then you can have as many as you want."

He acquiesced reluctantly, and we caught a train to town that landed us at the terminus shortly before three; thence we taxied to Whitehall.

"This place gives me the holy pip," said Mouldy, as we threaded our way through the stuffy-smelling corridors of the Admiralty. "Looks as if the Navy was run by women from what I can see of the place. Phew! Shockin' frowst!" We reached the Director's room.

"Never mind that," I said, and opened the door. I breathed a sigh of relief to find the room was empty, and glanced at my watch. It was ten minutes past three. Well, if Mouldy couldn't fix things in twenty minutes. . . . He walked to the open window and stood staring out on the Horse Guards Parade.

122 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Humph!" he observed moodily. "I reckon the bounding blue's good enough for me. . . . I wouldn't come and work here for a thousand a year. What the blazes does the Director want to see *me* for, anyway? He's all adrift too."

I was hunting about on the paper-strewn desk for the bell press I knew was there if I could find it. There were three: one marked "Secretary," another "Messenger," and a third "Stenographer." I took a long breath and pressed the third.

"Mouldy," I said, "don't get into mischief. Wait here till I come back. I shan't be a minute." Then I made tracks for the door.

In the semi-gloom of the passage outside a tall girl brushed past me and entered the room, pencil and notebook in hand. It was Miss Mayne, and I waited till the door closed before I looked at my watch. "I'll give them two minutes," I thought. "And if she doesn't come back——"

I gave them ten minutes, as a matter of fact, then I knocked at the door and went in.

"Mouldy," I said, "you needn't wait. It's all right. I mean, the Director doesn't want to see you after all."

They had not apparently heard my knock, because Miss Mayne's head was resting on Mouldy's shoulder, and he was stroking her hair with his damaged hand. She was crying softly, with her cheek against his coat.

Mouldy raised his head and glared at me over

Miss Mayne's shoulder. She neither moved nor turned her head.

"Here," he said, "you 'op it!"

I went out into the corridor, closing the door softly behind me.

Then for the first time since we landed I felt tired—more tired than I had ever felt in my life before.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For purposes of fiction, only the broad outlines of a great achievement have been sketched into this story; and no attempt has been made to reproduce faithfully the strategy or events of St. George's Day, 1918. Indeed, only such ships find their replicas here as the turning-circle of the tale allows, and if the Author has anywhere endeavoured to be true to facts, it is in the portrayal of those fearsome and bloody conditions under which the Navy added so fair a page to History.

II

BEHIND THE VEIL :

THE STORY OF THE Q BOATS

(1918)

I

FIRST BLOOD

THERE was a day, now happily past, when the submarine scourge was broadcast upon the seas; then the country turned for its salvation to the Navy, upon which, under the good providence of God, it had grown accustomed to rely in most of the crises of its history. Scientific and mechanical appliances, on a scale adequate to meet and checkmate the outrage of unrestricted submarine warfare, could not be produced by pressing a button. With workshops and laboratories yielding their output at highest pressure, the German submarine building yards were gaining in the race. Every day brought its sickening tale of sinking and burning and murder on the high seas, and in Whitehall offices men studied statistics and columns of figures with faces ever growing graver.

The irritable tension of those days is best forgotten now. Prices rose, ships sank, and the Navy said not a word. It was "doing its damndest" in silence,

according to its wont. And not even in fore-castle or Wardroom did men so much as whisper what was afoot. To-day* the submarine remains merely as a stern corrective, curbing waste and extravagance, bracing the nation's nerve. The ingenuity of man is boundless, and science has not yet said her last word; human courage and devoted valour alone seem to have reached a point there is no transcending. It was these two factors which stemmed the flood at the moment of supreme crisis; on these the veil is at last lifted, and the tale now told in all simplicity and truth.

The methods of the German submarine in its war against unarmed shipping gradually settled down to a routine which varied but little in the early phases of the conflict. It was the custom to attempt to torpedo at sight, on the principle of the least said the soonest mended. If the torpedo missed, as was not infrequently the case, the submarine broke surface a mile or so away from the ship and fired a shot across her bows. The merchantman had then two alternatives: to take to his heels and try to escape, or to heave to and abandon ship. In the latter case the submarine closed the derelict to within a few hundred yards and summoned the boats alongside. At the muzzle of a revolver the Captain was ordered into the submarine with his papers, and the crew of his boat directed to row a party of German sailors, bearing bombs, back to the ship. These worthies, having placed the

* Written in August, 1918.

126 An Awfully Big Adventure

bombs in the ship's vitals and looted the officers' quarters, returned to the submarine, propelled by the men they had robbed and whose ship they were engaged in sinking. In due course the bombs exploded and the ship disappeared. It was an economical method, since bombs cost less than torpedoes, and the formality of looting the ship helped to preserve its popularity.

For a while the Navy noted these methods and the little human failings of the enemy in silence. Then it drew a deep breath and made its plans accordingly. It argued that a man-of-war could be disguised as a tramp steamer and carry concealed armament. Such a vessel, by plying on the trade routes, must inevitably meet a submarine in time, and in her character of peaceful merchantman be ordered to abandon ship. The ship might be abandoned to all outward appearances, but still retain sufficient men concealed on board to fight the hidden guns when the moment came for her to cast disguise to the winds and hoist the White Ensign. Certain risks had to be taken for granted, of course; the almost inevitable torpedo sooner or later, the probability of a little indiscriminate shelling while the submarine approached, the possibility of being ultimately sunk before assistance could arrive. Yet the odds were on the submarine being sunk first, and the rest was on the knees of the gods.

An old collier of some 2,000 tons was selected from among the shipping at the disposal of the Admiralty.

and taken to a Dockyard port, where she unostentatiously underwent certain structural alterations. These included disappearing mountings for guns concealed beneath hatchway covers, and masked by deck-houses which collapsed like cards at a jerk of a lever. From the host of volunteers, among whom were retired Admirals, Captains, Commanders, and Lieutenants of the Royal Navy, a young Lieutenant-Commander was selected and appointed in command. His officers were volunteers from the Royal Naval Reserve, ex-merchant seamen, familiar enough with the rôle they were required to play, and in some cases with little mental scores of their own which required adjustment when the time came. The crew was mostly from the West Country, men of Devon with one or two traditions to uphold in the matter of brave adventure. It also included Welshmen and Irish with a pretty taste for a fight, and a few Scots, of the dour type, hard to frighten. They were picked from the Royal Navy, Fleet and Royal Reserves—merchant seamen and fishermen the last, many of whom had formed a nodding acquaintance with Death long before they received this invitation to a closer intimacy. Their ages ranged between 17 and 52.

They sailed from Queenstown under the Red Ensign; but before they left some of the crew trudged, as pilgrims to a shrine, and stood awhile among the mounds in that pathetic God's acre where the women and children of the *Lusitania* rest. They were then but freshly turned, those mounds, in their eloquent

128 An Awfully Big Adventure

diversity of lengths, and men had not begun to forget. . . .

For five weary months they endured the winter gales of the Atlantic, wallowing to and fro along the trade routes, outwardly a scallywag tramp, but behind her untidy bulwarks observing, with certain necessary modifications, the discipline and customs of his Majesty's Navy. With paint-pot and sail-cloth they improved the ship's disguise from time to time, and wiled away the heart-breaking monotony of the days by inventing fresh devices to conceal their character.

The ship's steward's assistant, when not engaged upon his office as "dusty boy," was ordered to don female attire over his uniform and recline in a prominent position on the poop in a deck-chair. This allurement was calculated to prove an irresistible bait. The Navigator, whose action station was the abandonment of the ship in the rôle of distracted Master, fashioned the effigy of a stuffed parrot and fastened it inside a cage which he proposed to take away with him in the boat, thus heightening the pathos of the scene and whetting the blood-lust of the enemy. . . .

From time to time watchful patrols swooped down upon them, exchanged a few curt signals in the commercial code, and bade them pass on their imaginary occasions. Once a Cruiser, less easily satisfied than the remainder, bade the rusty-sided collier heave to, and sent an officer to board her; he climbed inboard

at the head of armed men to find himself confronted, in the person of the "Master," with a term-mate of *Britannia* days and a grin he is not likely to forget. Then, early one spring morning, when the daylight was stealing out of grey skies across the Atlantic waste, the track of a torpedo bubbled across the bows and passed ahead of the ship. The moment for which they had waited five weary months had come.

In accordance with her rôle of tramp steamer in the early days of the War, the ship held steadily on her way, observing the stars in their courses, but not otherwise interested in the universe. Inboard, however, the alarm rang along the mess-decks and saloons, and men crawled into hen-coops and deck-houses to man the hidden guns. A few minutes later the submarine broke surface half a mile astern of the ship, and fired a shot across her bows. Whereupon the supposed collier stopped her engines, and lay rolling in the trough of the seas with steam pouring from her exhausts, while the crew, who had rehearsed this moment to a perfection never yet realised on the boards of legitimate drama, rushed to and fro with every semblance of panic. The Captain danced from one end of the bridge to the other, waving his arms and shouting; boats were turned out and in again amid a deliberate confusion that brought blushes to the cheeks of the ex-merchant seamen called upon to play the part.

In the meantime the submarine had approached at full speed to within about 700 yards, and, evidently

130 An Awfully Big Adventure

not satisfied with the speed at which the ship was being abandoned, fired another shot, which pitched 50 yards short of the engine-room. There was apparently nothing further to be gained by prolonging the performance for this impatient audience, and the Lieutenant-Commander on the bridge, cap in hand, and breathless with his pantomimic exertions, blew a shrill blast on his whistle. Simultaneously the White Ensign fluttered to the masthead, deck-houses and screens clattered down, and three minutes later the submarine sank under a rain of shells and Maxim bullets. As she disappeared beneath the surface the avenger reached the spot, and dropped a depth-charge over her. A moment after the explosion the submarine appeared in a perpendicular position alongside the ship, denting the bilge-keel as she rolled drunkenly among the waves. The after gun put five more rounds into the shattered hull at point-blank range, and, as she sank for the last time, two more depth-charges were dropped to speed her passing.

The Lieutenant-Commander in command had personally been superintending the administering of the *coup de grâce* from the stern, and, as he turned to make his way forward to the bridge, for a few brief moments the bonds of naval discipline relaxed. His men surged round him in a wildly cheering throng, struggling to be the first to wring him by the hand. They then mustered in the saloon, standing bare-headed while their Captain read the Prayers of Thanksgiving for Victory, and called for three cheers

for his Majesty the King. They cheered as only men can cheer in the first exultant flush of victory. But as the vessel gathered way and resumed her grim quest, each man realised, deep down in his heart, that far sterner ordeals lay ahead.

ORDEAL BY FIRE

BECAUSE man is mortal, not infallible, and Fortune at her brightest a fickle jade, it was inevitable that sooner or later a day must come when a crippled German submarine would submerge beneath a hail of shells, miraculously succeed in patching up her damaged hull, and, under cover of darkness, crawl back to port. Word would then go out from Wilhelmshaven of a British man-of-war disguised as a lumbering tramp, with such and such a marking on her funnel, with stumpy masts and rusty deck-houses, who carried guns concealed in wheel-house and hen-coops, whose bulwarks collapsed, and whose bridge screens masked quick-firers and desperate men. German submarines would be warned that to approach such a vessel was to enter a death-trap, unless every precaution was first taken to ensure she had been abandoned.

Such a day came in due course; misty, windless, with the aftermath of a great storm rolling eastward beneath a sullen swell. A vessel with the outward appearance of a merchantman (the fruits of whose labours, for the past six months had doubtless perplexed that section of the Wilhelmshaven bureaucracy concerned with the non-return of

U-boats), sighted towards evening the periscope and conning-tower of a submarine a mile away on her beam.

The figure on the bridge of the tramp, who carried, among other papers in his charge, his commission as a Commander of the Royal Navy, laughed as Drake might have laughed when the sails of a Spanish galleon broke the horizon. A tangle of flags appeared at the periscope of the submarine, and the tramp stopped obediently, blowing off steam in great clouds. Her Commander turned over the pages of the International Signal Code, smiling still. "Hoist: 'Cannot understand your signal,'" he said to the signalman, "I want to waste a few minutes," and moved to the engine-room voice-pipe. Obedient to his directions, the screws furtively jogged ahead under cover of the escaping steam, edging the steamer towards the watching enemy. The latter, however, promptly manned her foremost gun, turned, and slowly steamed towards them; she opened fire at a range of half a mile, the shell passing over the funnel of the disguised man-of-war.

In the tense excitement of that moment, when men's nerves and faculties were stretched like banjo-strings, the report of the submarine's gun rang loud through the still air. One of the man-of-war's gunlayers, lying concealed within his collapsible deck-house, heard the report, and, thinking that the ship herself had opened fire without the customary warning gongs, flung down the screens which masked his

134 An Awfully Big Adventure

weapon.³ Any further attempt at concealment was useless. The fire-gongs rang furiously at every gun position, the White Ensign was triced up to the mast-head in the twinkling of an eye, and the action started. After the first few hits the submarine lay motionless, with her bows submerged and her stern in the air for upwards of five minutes, while shells burst all about her. The heavy swell made shooting difficult, but eventually she sank in a great commotion of the water and dense clouds of vapour that hung over the surface for some minutes. Two depth-charges were dropped over her, and if ever men had cause for modest self-congratulation on having ridded the seas of yet another scourge, it would seem that the officers and crew of The King's Ship might have laid claim to their share. Yet, by ways unknown and incredible, it was claimed by the enemy that the submarine contrived to return, with shot-holes plugged, to tell the tale.

Once the cat was out of the bag, it was obvious that in the future the enemy would not rise to the surface until his torpedo had found its mark, and it became part of this grim game of bluff for the victim to ensure that she was hit. Then, when the "panic party" had abandoned the ship, the remainder must wait concealed and unresponsive beside their hidden guns, while the submarine rose to the surface and either closed within range or shelled them with sufficient thoroughness to convince him—who judged endurance and self-control

by no mean standards—that the limit of human courage had been reached; that there could be no one concealed on board, and that he might with safety approach to loot and burn. Now this, as Mr. Kipling would put it, “was a damned tough bullet to chew.” They were no demi-gods, nor yet fanatics, these three-score or so sailor-men. They were just ordinary human beings, with the average man’s partiality for life and a whole skin, and the love of wife and bairn or sweetheart plucking at the heart-strings of most of them. But they shared what is not given to all men in this world of human frailty—a whole-souled confidence in a fellow-man, which would have carried them at his lightest nod through the gates of hell.

Under his command, then, they sailed with a cargo of timber in each hold, and in due course, about 9.45 one morning, a torpedo was seen approaching the star-board beam. Observing his rôle as Master of a care-less tramp, with poor look-outs, the Commander held on his course. At the last moment, however, the helm was imperceptibly altered to ensure the ship being struck abaft the engine-room, where the torpedo might do least damage. Those whom fate has afforded the opportunity of studying the trail of an approaching torpedo will, if they recall their sensations, appreciate to some extent the iron nerve requisite to such a manœuvre. The torpedo burst abreast No. 3 hold, hurling a wall of water and wreckage to the height of the mast, and blowing a hole in the ship’s side 40 feet

136 An Awfully Big Adventure

wide. Half-stunned and deafened by the concussion, the Commander raised himself on his hands and knees, where he had been flung, and shouted to the Navigator : "They've got us this time !" The Navigator, who was inside the chart-house, thrust his head out for a moment, moistening a lead pencil with his lips. "I reckon I've got time to finish working out this sight, sir," he replied with a grin, and withdrew his head.

The alarm-gongs had already sent the guns' crews to their invisible guns, and immediately after the explosion "Panic stations " was ordered, followed in due course by "Abandon ship." The Navigator, having finished his "sight," and now acting as "Master," abandoned ship with the "panic party." No sooner had the boats been lowered and shoved off from the ship's side, however, than the Chief Engineer rang up from below and reported that the after bulk-head had gone and that the engine-room was filling fast. Peering, on all fours, through a slit in the bridge-screen, waiting for the inevitable periscope to appear, the Commander bade him hold on as long as he could and keep enough steam to work the pumps; when the water had extinguished the fires, and then only, the engines were abandoned and the staff remained concealed. This they did, crawling eventually on to the cylinders to escape from the rising flood.

Shortly after the torpedo struck the ship the periscope of a submarine broke the surface a couple of hundred yards distant, evidently watching proceed-

ings with a deliberate, cautious scrutiny. Moving slowly through the water, like the fin of a waiting shark, the sinister object came gradually down the ship's side, within five yards of the breathless boats, and not ten yards from where the Commander lay beside the voice-pipes that connected him with the Assistant-Paymaster, R.N.R., who, concealed in the gun control position, was awaiting the order to open fire. From the altitude of the bridge, the submerged whale-back hull was plainly visible to the figure crouched behind the bridge-screens, and the temptation to yield to the impulse of the moment, to open fire and end the suspense, shook even his iron nerves. A lucky shot might pierce the lead-grey shadow that moved 15 feet beneath the surface; but water plays strange tricks with projectiles, deflecting them at unexpected ricochets, at angles no man can foretell; moreover, the submarine was in diving trim. The odds against a broadside overwhelming her before she could plunge into the depths and escape were too great. So the Commander waited, with self-control that was almost superhuman, and, prone beside their guns, unseeing and unseen, his men waited too.

The ship had then sunk by the stern until it was awash, and the crew of the gun masked by the wheel-house were crouched up to their knees in water. A black cat, the ship's mascot, that had been blown off the forecastle by the explosion of the torpedo, swam aft and in over the stern, whose counter rose normally

138 An Awfully Big Adventure

20 feet above the surface. Still the periscope continued its unhurried observation; it travelled past the ship, across the bow, and then slowly moved away, as if content that the task was done. For the space of nearly a minute bitter disappointment and mortification rose in the Commander's heart. His ship had been torpedoed and was sinking. Their quarry had all but been within their grasp, and was now going to escape unscathed. Then, when hope was flickering to extinction, the submarine rose to the surface 300 yards on the port bow, and came slowly back towards the ship.

Up to this juncture, although the ship was settling deeper every moment, the Commander had purposely refrained from summoning assistance by wireless, lest interruption should come before his grim work was done. Now, however, he saw at one quick glance that the Lord had indeed "placed the enemy upon his lee bow," and the rest was only a matter of a few bloody moments. Accordingly he gave orders for an urgent wireless signal to be sent out forthwith summoning assistance, and waited until the submarine was on a line when all his guns would bear. She reached the desired spot at the moment when the German Commander was complacently emerging from the conning-tower; up went the White Ensign, and the first shot beheaded him; he dropped back into the interior of the submarine, and his wholly unexpected reappearance imparted a shock of surprise to the remainder of the inmates from which they never recovered. The

submarine lay motionless as a dead whale, while the avenging broadside shattered the hull, and the grizzled pensioner inside a hen-coop scientifically raked her deck with a Maxim to prevent her gun from being manned. She finally sank with her conning-tower open and the crew pouring shrieking out of the hatchway.

From the swirling vortex of oil and blood and air bubbles in which the majority vanished, two dazed prisoners were rescued by the exultant "panic party" in the boats, and brought back to the ship. Once on board, however, the imperious necessities of the moment overwhelmed even the elation of victory. Bulkheads were shored in all compartments still accessible, confidential documents destroyed in anticipation of the worst, and then all but the Commander and a handful of men took to the boats and awaited succour. It came at noon in the guise of a congratulatory and businesslike Destroyer, and was augmented later by a couple of Sloops. By 5 P.M. the water had ceased to gain and the ship was in tow, heading for port; there she arrived, and was safely beached after dark the following day.

Thus her crew, emerging triumphant from the ordeal, added at the last a feat of seamanship which saved the ship. It required no great power of imagination to foretell what lay ahead; yet, when the time came for a fresh venture under the command of the man who had brought them victorious through the ordeals that were past, they sailed with light hearts

140 An Awfully Big Adventure

and unafraid. As if for a pledge of that devotion, he wore thenceforward, on the left breast of his ancient monkey-jacket, the scrap of ribbon which it is the King's pleasure men shall wear "For Valour."

WON BY WAITING

THE disguise adopted by such of his Majesty's ships as were selected to cope with the U-boat menace, varied according to the changing fashions. In the early days of the war the rôle of care-free tramp, steering a steady course, and *minus* look-outs or gun, was sufficient to lure the enemy to close quarters on the surface. But as the peculiar methods of warfare adopted by the German Government harked back to piracy and rape, so the custom of the seas reverted to the arming of merchantmen for defensive purposes.

For purpose of offence against the enemy, with which this story of a King's ship is concerned, a dummy gun sufficed; at all events for preliminaries. It was mounted prominently aft, attended by a conspicuously vigilant gunner. To outward appearances the ship was then an armed British merchant vessel, steering a zigzag course for home at a good speed, conscious that she was in the danger zone, and, by virtue of her unmistakable gun and position, liable to be torpedoed at sight according to the code of customs and chivalry of the sea—as revised by Germany. Torpedoed at sight she was, at eight o'clock of a misty summer

142 An Awfully Big Adventure

morning, in a blinding rain storm and heavy sea. The torpedo was fired at apparently close range, since it jumped out of the water when one hundred yards from the ship; it struck the engine-room near the water-line, flooding the boiler-room, engine-room, and adjacent hold. The Stoker Petty Officer on duty in the engine-room was killed outright by the explosion, and the Third Engineer, who held a commission as Engineer Sub-Lieutenant in the Naval Reserve, was half-stunned and badly wounded by flying splinters and fragments of coal. Despite the inrush of water, he contrived to reach the hatchway, and arrived on deck reeling with shock, half-flayed, and bleeding, to stagger to his post in the second act of the grim drama.

One of the lifeboats had been blown to smithereens, fragments of it being lodged even in the wires of the aerial between the masts, so great was the force of the explosion. Under the command of the Navigator, acting the part of Master, the "panic party" abandoned the ship in the remaining three boats as the ship settled deeper in the water. The officers and men whose station was on board were already motionless at their invisible guns; in the majority of cases they were concealed by screens, but the crew of the foremost gun were compelled to lie prone on their faces on the exposed forecastle, unable to stir a muscle until the order came to open fire.

Then for thirty-five leaden minutes, followed the savage ordeal of waiting for the unknown.

For aught these motionless figures knew, the submarine might torpedo them again at any moment, might break surface and shell them at extreme range till they sank, or, an even more nerve-racking possibility, might set off in pursuit of a fresh victim and escape. Withal was the consciousness that a single movement on board, so much as a finger raised above screen or coaming, would betray their true character and bring the game of bluff to a swift and tragic conclusion. The periscope of the submarine had broken surface a quarter of an hour after the torpedo struck, about 400 yards distant on the port beam. It turned after a while and steered towards the ship, but the Captain and Signalman, prone at each end of the bridge, with their eyes glued to the observation slits, alone were aware of their quarry's movements. It was in the tense stillness of those moments, a stillness only disturbed by the lapping of the waves round the water-logged hull, and by the hiss of escaping steam, that from the little group of prostrate figures round the foremost gun rose a man's whistle, executing a gay, if somewhat tremulous, ditty of the sea. For a moment those in the immediate vicinity of the performer listened to the eerie music without comment. Then a motionless officer, moved by a sense of what was seemingly at such a time and what was not, rebuked the minstrel. "I dursn't stop, sir," said the boy—he was only seventeen—"cos if I stops whistlin' I gits scared."

As the submarine drew nearer to the ship the Com-

144 An Awfully Big Adventure

mander on the bridge of the disguised man-of-war cast a swift glance round to see that all was well, and saw the old and trusted Quartermaster lying face downwards beside the wheel. "For God's sake," he called, "don't show yourself, he's nibbling. . . ." "Aye, aye, sir," said the faithful seaman. And then, so ingrained apparently had become the habit of disguise on board, he furtively dragged a lifebelt over the most prominent portion of his anatomy.

When fifty yards off the ship the periscope vanished, to reappear a few minutes later directly astern. Very deliberately, as a cat plays with a mouse before dealing the last stroke, the periscope travelled on to the starboard quarter, turned, and came back round the stem to the port beam, where the boats were lying. The stage management of the drama then passed into the hands of the Navigator in charge of the boats. His task was not lightened by a disposition on the part of the "panic party" to regard the affair in the light of high comedy, despite the cold scrutiny of the periscope. In no measured terms he reminded them that they were presumed by the Teutonic intelligence beneath the waves to be terrified mariners, not a boat-load of grinning buffoons; and then, mindful of the shortness of the visibility and the known weakness of the enemy for light banter with castaways in boats, he began pulling towards the ship. As he had foreseen, the submarine promptly rose to the surface and followed in pursuit, closing to within a few yards of the masked guns on board. An angry

Hun shouted abuse through a megaphone from the top of the submarine's conning tower, and was reinforced a moment later by an equally abusive and impatient gentleman of the good old Prussian school, clasp- ing a Maxim in his hands.

The prospect of being shot by either party at this juncture of the performance was none too remote. Yet the boat continued pulling as if manned by deaf mutes until the submarine had been lured into the desired position. Then suddenly the eagerly awaited White Ensign shot up to the masthead. Screens clattered down along the length of the ship's side, and a broadside of yellow flame leaped out over their heads. The submarine was suddenly plastered by bursting shell and half hidden by leaping water-spouts, as she slowly listed over to her side, with oil spouting from the rents in her hull. Her crew scrambled wildly out of the conning tower and waved their hands above their heads in token of surrender. Fire instantly ceased on board the British man-of-war, when unexpectedly the crippled enemy, her stern submerged, shot ahead and made off at high speed. The would-be "Kamerads" on her deck were swept into the sea by her last wild rush through the water, and the British guns broke out again in vengeful chorus. Fire was continued until she blew up and sank, one wretch clinging to her bows as she disappeared.

In spite of the heavy sea, the boats succeeded in rescuing two prisoners from the water before returning to the ship. An American Destroyer arrived a

146 An Awfully Big Adventure

few hours later, accompanied by two Sloops. With their assistance the ship was brought safely into port, and of all who had passed through the soul-stirring events of the day none exhibited greater satisfaction or surprise at living to see it close than the late upholders of German freedom of the seas.

By command of his Majesty the King, one officer and one man were selected by ballot for the honour of the Victoria Cross from among the ship's company in recognition of the fact that, where all played so valiant a part, the distinction was earned by the ship rather than by the individual. Yet their task, the task required of them by the England which reads these lines at a well-found breakfast table, was still unfinished. They sailed again in another ship, knowing full well that they alone could never accomplish it entirely. But the name of that ship * shall be a household word some day wherever the English tongue is spoken, because of the ordeal these men endured behind her shattered bulwarks for England's sake.

* H.M.S. *Dunraven*.

THE SPLENDID FAILURE

To travel hopefully, said Robert Louis Stevenson, is better than to arrive; and therein he summed up the whole attitude of the Anglo-Saxon race towards human endeavour. It is our custom to honour the achievement less than the spirit, in the wistful hope, perhaps, that thus may we, too, be judged in our turn at the last. This is a record of failure, if the venture is to be judged by its material result. Yet the lesson it will carry to succeeding generations is concerned with neither success nor failure, but with those shining heights of the Spirit (attainable by every mother's son) where no fear is.

The King's ship to which this story relates was a steamer of some 3,000 tons, to outward appearances an armed merchantman with a light gun mounted on her poop. To make plain what happened on board it is necessary, however, that the uninitiated should be admitted into certain secrets of her construction. A wooden structure on the poop, common to merchantmen of her type, concealed a gun of effective calibre behind collapsible covers. Beneath this gun position, and occupying much of the space below the poop, were the magazine and shell rooms. Four depth-charges were fitted at her stern; any one of these

148 An Awfully Big Adventure

dropped over the position of a submerged submarine was calculated on detonating to do all that was necessary. In addition, a smaller gun was mounted on the forecastle on a disappearing mounting, while hencoops and deck fittings concealed similar armament at other points of vantage. To complete her offensive capabilities, she carried a masked torpedo tube on either beam.

This, then, was the true character of the ship which a German submarine sighted on the horizon at eleven o'clock one morning. She noted the small gun displayed defensively aft, and started in pursuit, firing as she went. The submarine was sighted directly she rose to the surface, whereupon the Captain of the man-of-war ordered the after gun to be manned and the remainder of the crew to take shell cover, tactics which differed in no respect from those customary to merchantmen under the circumstances. On the other hand, speed was imperceptibly decreased, and the crew of the light gun at the stern directed to shoot short in order to encourage the adversary to draw closer. It says much for the discipline on board that men thus prominently exposed to the fire of the pursuing enemy could deliberately continue to reply to it in the consciousness that their shots were not required to hit. German submarine commanders at this phase of the war were growing notoriously "nervy"; hysterical appeals for help were therefore sent out by wireless, in the hope that the enemy would intercept them and gain confidence.

The heavy sea gradually rendered it impossible for the submarine to maintain the pursuit and man her gun. She therefore abandoned the bombardment and came on at full speed, until after a chase of about an hour she turned broadside on and again opened fire. Shots were then falling close, and at 12.40 the steamer stopped, as great clouds of steam emerging from the engine-room showed she was disabled, and the "panic party" proceeded to abandon ship. To lend colour to the general atmosphere of demoralisation and confusion, one of the boats was purposely dropped by a single fall, and remained hanging from the davit in a vertical position. In the meantime the enemy had closed nearer and continued methodically shelling the ship. A shell struck the poop, exploding one of the depth-charges and blowing the officer in charge of the after concealed gun out of his control position; on recovering consciousness, however, he crawled inside the gun hatch, where his crew of seven men were hidden. The seaman superintending the depth-charges was badly wounded by this explosion and lay motionless. Seeing his condition, the hidden crew of the after gun attempted to drag him within their place of concealment, but the injured man stubbornly refused to be moved. "I was put here in charge of these things," he replied, indicating the remaining depth-charges, "and here I stop." And stop he did until subsequent events proved stronger than even his indomitable spirit. Two more shells burst inside the poop in quick succession, and a few

150 An Awfully Big Adventure

moments later dense clouds of smoke and flames disclosed the disquieting fact that the after part of the ship was heavily on fire.

From his customary place at the end of the bridge, peering through slits in his armoured coign of observation, the Captain watched the submarine turn and come slowly past the ship 400 yards away. The next moment, as he was about to open fire on an easy target, the wind caught the smoke from the conflagration aft and blew it like a curtain across his vision. The Captain was confronted with two alternatives. One was to open fire there and then on a partially obscured target, or wait until the submarine should round the stern and come past the weather side, where the smoke did not interfere with the accuracy of the shooting. At the same time he was conscious that the fire raging aft must very soon engulf the magazine. It could only be a matter of moments before the magazine blew up, and with it the masked gun and its crew.

Nothing but utter confidence in the devotion of that gun's crew, the conviction that even in the direst extremity they would remain concealed and motionless, enabled the Captain to choose the second of these alternatives. Yet he chose it, determined at all costs to make sure of his quarry, and waited; and while he waited the deck on which this gun's crew were crouched grew slowly red-hot, so that they were compelled to cling to the mounting of the gun and to hold the cartridges in their arms. Their ordeal ended as

the submarine was rounding the stern. The magazine and two more depth-charges blew up with a deafening roar, hurling gun, gun's crew, fragments of wreckage, and unexploded shells high in the air. One member of the crew fell into the water, where he was picked up by the "panic party"; the remainder, including the depth-charge keeper, landed in the well-deck, with the gun.

The concussion of the explosion had, however, started the electrically controlled fire-gongs at the remaining gun positions. Thereupon the White Ensign fluttered automatically up to the masthead, and one gun—the only one that would bear—opened an unavailing fire on the enemy, who had begun to dive immediately the explosion had taken place. The ruse had failed, and every man on board realised on the instant that what must follow was to be the supreme test. The wounded were removed out of sight with all speed, hoses were turned on to the burning part of the ship, and wireless signals sent out warning all men-of-war to divert traffic for a radius of 30 miles, that nothing should interrupt the last phase of this savage duel *à outrance*.

To borrow a phrase from sporting parlance, they ensured that the ring was kept, but in so doing they deprived themselves of any hope of succour from the savagery of the enemy, should the ship sink and leave them at the submarine's mercy. In this comfortable reflection, therefore, they settled down and awaited the inevitable torpedo.

152 An Awfully Big Adventure

It must be remembered that the ship was now openly a man-of-war, flying the White Ensign, with guns unmasked. At 1.20 P.M., two hours and twenty minutes after first sighting the submarine, a torpedo struck the ship abreast the engine-room, hurling blazing wreckage and water in all directions. With far-seeing thoroughness of organisation this moment had been anticipated sooner or later for months past. Accordingly, at the order of "Abandon ship," the men previously detailed launched the remaining boat and a raft, and paddled clear of the doomed vessel. The Captain and crews of two guns and both torpedo tubes, the Navigator, Assistant Paymaster, and Quartermaster remained on board. For the ensuing eighty minutes, while the fire in the poop continued to blaze furiously, and the ammunition in the vicinity detonated like a succession of gigantic Chinese crackers, the periscope circled suspiciously round the ship and boats. At 2.30 the submarine rose to the surface in a position on which none of the guns on board would bear, and began once more shelling the ship and boats with vindictive fury.

For twenty minutes the remnant on board endured this ordeal, lying face downwards and motionless on the splintered planking. It is recorded that during the hottest of the fire one of the foremost gun's crew requested, in a hoarse whisper, to be allowed to take his boots off. The officer in his vicinity inquired the reason for this strange request, to which the man replied that he didn't think he had much longer to

live, and, on the whole, thought he'd prefer not to die with his boots on. He subsequently explained that he came of a respectable family.

By means of the voice-pipe connecting him with the guns' control, the Captain cheered and encouraged his men through that long agony. Small wonder they loved an officer who exhorted them in such a pass to "keep merry and bright"; who quoted Bairnsfather to the boyish officer in the control when shells were bursting all about his head ("If you know of a better 'ole, go to it!"); who, when the wounded Navigator, blinded with blood at the opposite end of the bridge, called that he was done, replied: "You're all right! Hang on, 'cos we've got him cold!" and found time to steady the guns' crews with, "Remember the V.C. The King has given the ship, lads."

At 2.50 P.M. the submarine abruptly ceased shelling and submerged. Then, with only a periscope showing, he steamed once more past the ship. As he came abeam under-water, the British Captain played one of his few remaining trump cards, and discharged a torpedo; it missed by inches, and passed unnoticed. Going very slowly, the enemy then crossed the bow and came down the starboard side. One last desperate chance remained, and the second torpedo was fired. In an agony of suspense they watched the trail of bubbles flicker towards the periscope, held their breath for the explosion, and saw the tell-tale wake pass a foot astern of the periscope. They had

154 An Awfully Big Adventure

shot their bolt, and the game was up. A wireless signal was immediately sent out for urgent assistance, as the wary enemy had sighted the last torpedo and promptly dived. The ship was sinking fast, and to wait for another torpedo or further shelling would have meant the useless sacrifice of life. A United States destroyer, an armed yacht, and two British destroyers that had been hovering below the horizon, rushed up at full speed and took charge of the wounded. The ship sank thirty-four hours later, with her colours flying, after strenuous endeavours had been made to save her.

Despite the almost incredible gruelling the crew had undergone, all survived the action. The officer in charge of the after-gun received the Victoria Cross, and one of the gun's crew was selected by ballot for a similar honour. The remainder, including the hand told off for the depth-charges, who has since succumbed to his wounds, were awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal.

Much of the tale remains untold, but it is best brought to an all too brief conclusion in the words of the official report written by the officer, who, as his head and shoulders appeared above the bridge screen at the conclusion of the action, brought forth the following ecstatic shout from one of the "panic party": "Blimey! there's the Skipper still alive! Gawd, wouldn't them perishin' 'Uns give ninepence an inch for 'im!" This officer's report concludes as follows:

It is hardly necessary for me again to refer to the behaviour of my crew—the tactics I carried out were only possible through the utmost confidence I had in my ship and my crew. I would especially bring to your notice the extreme bravery of Lieutenant Bonner, R.N.R., the officer in charge, and the 4-in. gun's crew. Lieutenant Bonner, having been blown out of his control by the first explosion, crawled into the gun hatch with the crew. They there remained at their posts with a fire raging in the poop below and the deck getting red hot. One man tore up his shirt to give pieces to the gun's crew to stop the fumes getting into their throats, others lifted the boxes of cordite off the deck to keep them from exploding, and all the time they knew they must be blown up, as the secondary supply and magazine were immediately below. They told me afterwards that communication with the bridge was cut off, and although they would be blown up, they also knew they would spoil the show if they moved, so they remained until actually blown up with their gun.

Then, when, as wounded men, they were ordered to remain quiet in various places during the second action, they had to lie there unattended and bleeding, with explosions continually going on aboard and splinters from the enemy's shell-fire penetrating their quarters. Lieutenant Bonner, himself wounded, did what he could for two who were with him in the wardroom. When I visited them after the action they thought little of their wounds, but only expressed their disgust that the enemy had not been sunk. Surely such bravery is hard to equal. The strain for the men who remained on board after the ship

156 An Awfully Big Adventure

had been torpedoed, poop set on fire, cordite and shells exploding, and then the enemy shell-fire can easily be imagined. I much regret that two officers and seven men were wounded, and am very grateful to U.S.S. *Noma* for taking charge of the two most dangerous cases. I—we—deeply regret the loss of one of H.M. ships, and still more the escape of the enemy. We did our best, not only to destroy the enemy and save the ship, but also to show ourselves worthy of the Victoria Cross the King recently bestowed on the ship.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant,

(Signed) GORDON CAMPBELL,
Captain, R.N.

III

"NOT IN THE PRESENCE OF THE ENEMY"

(1918)

I

THE GLEANER

THE motor-launch chugged to the limit of her beat and wheeled with her bows to a rusty sunset. The wind had been freshening steadily since noon and the steep grey seas were edged with spray, streaked like the flanks of an over-spurred horse. The motor-launch, from a monotonous corkscrew roll, changed to a jerky see-saw that enveloped her in a bitterly cold cascade at every downward plunge.

The R.N.V.R. Lieutenant in command leaned with one broad shoulder against the side of the wheel-shelter, his legs braced far apart and his oilskin flapping wetly against his leather sea-boots. As each successive welter of spray drove past his head he raised a pair of glasses and searched the horizon to the westward where the sombre November sunset was fast fading.

Somewhere below that horizon the homeward-

518 An Awfully Big Adventure

bound convoy was approaching, and his orders were to patrol a given length of the swept channel up the coast on the look-out for floating mines that might have drifted by chance currents from distant mine-fields. Twice since dawn the sweepers had passed over that water and reported the fair-way clear; but with a dozen shiploads of wheat to pass up it in the morning, no one was taking any chances. "Patrol till dark; floating mines to be sunk by gun or rifle fire," said his orders. The R.N.V.R. Lieutenant had been reckoned a good shot with a rifle in the days when he was an Admiralty clerk, and spent his Saturday afternoons on a rifle range at Wormwood Scrubs; he glanced from the bucking deck of his command to the rifle hanging in slings over the Coxswain's head, and smiled rather doubtfully to himself. As if in challenge to that smile, the Signalman on the other side of the Coxswain suddenly extended his telescope and arm in a straight line to seaward.

"Mine awash, sir," he shouted. "Two points on the port bow." The Coxswain raised his eye from the binnacle and moved the wheel through half a turn.

The Lieutenant stared through his glasses. "Umph," he said. The crew of the muffled six-pounder in the bows emerged from the fore hatchway and began to cast off the clips securing the lid of the ammunition box.

In silence they stared at the dull green globular

object that bobbed past them in the trough of a sea, the soft lead horns projecting ominously as the waves washed over the rounded surface.

"One of ours," said the Lieutenant, with a swift expert glance. He stepped inboard a pace and studied a chart. "Hell! It's come a long way—must have been Tuesday's gale."

The launch held on her course till she had reached the limit of the safety zone of a bursting mine; stopped, and brought the gun to the ready. The gunlayer adjusted his sight, and the tiny gun platform rolled in sickening lurches.

"She may steady for a moment," said the Lieutenant, without conviction. "Choose your time." The gunlayer chose it.

"Bang!" A puff of smoke dissolved about the muzzle and the shell sent up a column of foam a yard beyond the preposterous target.

"Try again," said the Lieutenant, and unslung the rifle. "Fire on the downward roll."

The gunlayer fired on the downward and then on the upward roll, and each time the shell went sobbing away into the Channel haze, and the dark, smooth object still bobbed in the fast-fading light amid the waves. The Lieutenant kicked aside his seventeenth empty brass cylinder and snapped the rifle bolt angrily. "There's the smoke of the convoy," he shouted to his second in command, who was firing from aft and swearing in a monotonous undertone that sounded like a litany. "It's right in their track."

160 An Awfully Big Adventure

For the ensuing half-hour they kept up the fruitless fusillade until dusk blotted out the target.

The R.N.V.R. Lieutenant rang down for half-speed. "Secure the gun," he said, curtly, and to the Coxswain: "Close the blighter; we've got to make a rope's end fast and tow it inshore out of the fair-way." The Coxswain gave his Commanding Officer a searching, incredulous glance, as if he doubted his sanity, and spun the wheel round, but the Lieutenant was lurching aft on his way to the cabin hatch. He paused en route and thrust a head and shoulders into the engine-room. "Bring a can of lubricating oil aft an' a handful of waste," he shouted to the unseen occupant, and dived into his cabin.

Under direction of the First Lieutenant, a grass line was uncoiled and one end made fast to a cleat; there was no time to be lost, for the dusk was falling fast and the convoy with its attendant escorts was a bare five miles away. The motor-launch circled round the floating mine, visible only by reason of the intermittent whiteness of the broken water about it. The Sub-Lieutenant stared at it half-fascinated, the coils of the line in his hands. For a moment he felt an angry resentment against the minesweepers; this, assuredly, was their business. Then he remembered that they had garnered their grim harvest and returned to port. The motor-launch was only a gleaner.

"Now then!" He turned to see his Captain at his elbow, stark naked as the moment he was born, glistening with oil like a wrestler of old. "Give us

the rope's end. Drop down to leeward when I shout—an' stand by with a hot grog."

The speaker knotted the rope loosely over one muscular shoulder and measured the distance to the mine with a dispassionate eye. "If I bungle it and foul one of the horns," he said, "it'll blow the boat to smithereens. You'd better stand by with life-belts for yourselves."

"What about you?" asked the Sub. His Captain gave a little grim laugh. "If that egg breaks, there won't be much of me to put a belt round," and without further ado he slid over the stern into the water.

The crew of the launch watched the receding head and shoulders as their Commanding Officer was carried to leeward on the crest of a wave, and the Sub-Lieutenant, paying out loose coils of rope into the dark water, murmured: "That's a man for you!" They had a glimpse of white gleaming body, as the swimmer circled cautiously round the floating mine and the waves lifted or dropped him into their hollows. Then for a moment he vanished and the watching group aft held their breath.

"If he grabs for the ring bolt and catches hold of a horn——" said the Coxswain, and left the sentence unfinished. The seconds passed. Then out of the darkness came a thin hail. The Coxswain jumped to the wheel; the second in command flung the slack line over the stern, and the launch dropped down to leeward.

The numb, exhausted figure hauled over the side a

162 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

minute later, to be wrapped in blankets and massaged back to speech, resumed his clothes and clumped forward to the wheel-house as the launch turned inshore with the mine in tow.

He stared into the darkness astern as the line tautened. "God knows if there are any more farther up the coast . . . But our beat's clear. Full speed, Coxswain ! "

THE MILLIONTH CHANCE

THREE hundred feet above mother earth sat an able seaman of the Royal Navy, reflecting on the strangeness of his profession. For the first eighteen months of the War he had been a loading number of one of a Battleship's six-inch guns; as such he spent most of his waking hours punching a dummy projectile into the breech of a "loader," or, when not at meals or asleep, following critically the fortunes of cinema artistes as portrayed on the Grand Fleet films. There came a day after that when the vagaries of fortune transplanted him to a Dover Monitor, where he grew accustomed to the roar of fifteen-inch shells from the Belgian coast batteries passing overhead, or pitching short of his floating home in a thunderous upheaval of white water. Finally he returned to his depot suffering from gun-deafness, to find himself in due course one of a working party attached to a high-power Naval Wireless Station, and still a little hard of hearing.

No one had consulted him as to his personal inclinations in the matter of these changes; indeed, he never asked himself if it was merely blind chance that ruled his comings and goings, or Fate, far-seeing,

164 An Awfully Big Adventure

omniscient, working to an appointed end. Destiny, as he knew it, always appeared in the guise of a ship's corporal with a Muster List and a stump of pencil. He paid his debts, tucked his "papers" into the lining of his cap, shouldered his bag and hammock, and passed without concern to such future as awaited him.

Whatever the effect of heavy gunfire on his hearing, his nervous system remained unimpaired; so much so that, as he sat swaying in a "boatswain's stool," three-quarters of the way up one of the four hundred and thirty feet wireless masts, slapping creosote on to the wooden lattice work with a brush, he hummed a little tune to himself :

"Laugh while you may,
There's still to-day—
You may be dead ter-morrer!"

He crooned contentedly, and desisted from his labours to survey, like Moses of old, the landscape o'er.

Below him, seen through a thin veil of shifting mist, stretched smooth grey downs and a network of roads. Directly beneath, tiny figures moved among the buildings of the wireless station; on the slope of a far hillside rows of conical tents showed white in a passing gleam of sunshine. Something moving along one of the roads held his interest for a moment and the song came to an end; a field-gun battery going out to exercise; horses the size of mice. He wondered

what it must be like to be an airman and pepper an enemy battery with a machine-gun. Wouldn't they scatter! Horses all mixed up with the traces, plunging. Pap! pap! pap! would go the machine-gun with the goggled face behind it, laughing triumphant. . . Fine, it 'ud be.

He bent his head back and stared up into the low-lying clouds that seemed to hover just overhead. Was it because he had been thinking of aeroplanes, or did he really hear the hum of an engine coming down out of the mist? The slender lattice-work above him rose towering for another hundred feet, taking the eye criss-cross along its diminishing perspective until it made you giddy. The sailor knotted his brows and cursed his deafness as he strained to listen. Surely it was an aeroplane. He could feel the vibration of its engine rather than hear it. Or was it the wind droning in the taut wire stays that spread earthward on every side.

Then, swift as a falling stone, flashing dark through the mist, he saw the machine, apparently coming straight for him.

"Look out!" he shouted, and as he spoke the whirring thing crashed fairly into the mast fifty feet above him with a splintering concussion that shook the framework like a whip. The bluejacket ducked his head as a shower of fragments descended, and sat waiting for the thing to fall. Nothing happened. The last piece of shattered propeller dropped clattering down the lattice for a little distance, rebounded and

166 An Awfully Big Adventure

vanished into space. Only the humming of the wind broke a silence that had somehow become dreadful; dreading he knew not what, the man looked up.

There was the plane, with her nose jammed securely between the bars of the crossed lattice, embedded as far as the wings. The fuselage stuck out into the air at right angles to the mast like a dragon-fly that had flown blindly against a sticky window. . . The sight was extraordinary.

The A.B. craned his head downwards. The small figures on the earth were running to and fro like ants. But where was the pilot? He peered up at the motionless wreck and shouted. No reply came. Odd! He'd better go and see about the pilot, who evidently hadn't seen the mast in the fog, and, by the millionth chance, hit it.

Taking with him the rope that secured the boatswain's-stool he commenced to climb. P'raps the bloke was stunned—dead, more likely. Anyhow, he couldn't leave him there in his seat with the likelihood of the machine breaking off from its nose and falling to the earth any moment. Just as well he'd been there at the moment when it happened; that was chance, too, in a way. . . Rum turn, altogether.

Foot by foot, from cross-bar to girder and girder to cross-bar he climbed, and finally reached the point of impact. The lattice was smashed to matchwood here, and the mast swayed dizzily above the damaged

place. Another pull and a heave enabled the rescuer to look down on the unconscious figure who had been the puppet of so incredible a whim of fate. He lay face upwards across one of the wings where he had been flung by the force of the collision. His arms were outstretched, and both legs, from his knees down, hung over the edge of the wing into three hundred and fifty feet of space. The machine had but to sag a couple of feet, or the unconscious figure stir ever so little. . . .

The able seaman took a deep breath. Far below him—perhaps half an hour's climb—men with ropes were toiling upwards to the rescue. Overhead the damaged mast shivered and creaked in the wind; a yard away on the curved surface of the wing lay the pilot, spread-eagled and motionless. "*That ain't no place for you!*" said the bluejacket. He knotted the rope round his body, made the other end fast to the mast, and gingerly tested the frail platform. Would it stand the weight of both?

Inch by inch he crawled out along the wing, stretched forth a hand, and grabbed the pilot's gauntleted wrist. Then unfastening the rope from his own body he tied it round the insensible figure, and slowly, breathlessly, with many a pause and muttered oath at the tumultuous thumping of his heart—which seemed as if it must bring down the mast—he drew the body off the wing and regained the mast. Sitting in the V-shaped angle of the cross-girders he lashed the boy's shoulders securely to the nearest upright, and

168 An Awfully Big Adventure

with the limp legs across his lap, produced and with difficulty lit the stump of a clay pipe. His hand shook and the perspiration trickled cold behind his ears; but presently his lips parted, and in a not too certain voice he began again his interrupted song :

“Laugh while you may,
There’s still to-day—
You may be dead ter-morrer !”

CHINKS

"THE Hohangho," read the First Lieutenant, turning the pages of a three-day-old paper, "has shifted its course. It is estimated that upwards of three-quarters of a million souls perished in the inundation of villages." He puffed at his pipe and eyed the inmates of the Destroyer's Wardroom with solemnity. "They give it a four-line paragraph. . . . Three-quarters of a million——"

"Shortage of paper," said the Lieutenant in Command. "'Sides, they were only Chinks. What's a million Chinese more or less? Don't suppose anybody worried about it. When I was on the China Station——"

"But," interrupted the First Lieutenant, "when you come to think of it, that's about half the total British casualties so far in the War. Wiped out—phut! In one act! Men, women, and children!"

"You don't think of 'em quite like that," replied the Captain of the Destroyer, stirring his cup of coffee. He braced his back against a stanchion to steady himself to the roll of the ship. "There are four hundred millions of the blighters, remember. They all look alike; they've no religion, no ambi-

170 An Awfully Big Adventure

tion, no aim in life except to scratch together enough for the next meal——”

A Signalman came tumbling down the ladder, water streaming from his oilskins.

“Please, sir, Officer of the Watch says there’s a glare ahead looks like a ship a-fire. Shall he increase speed?”

The Captain, who had descended for a cup of coffee, and still wore his sea-boots and duffle coat, snatched up his cap and was on the bridge with his glasses to his eyes in fewer seconds than it takes to write these lines.

The Destroyer was slashing her way past a head sea and the sound of the wind and waves made speech difficult. The Gunner was on watch, peering ahead into the darkness through binoculars.

“Oil ship, sir, by the looks of it,” he shouted.

The Captain studied the far-off glare in silence for a moment, and gave an order to the telegraphman.

“Yes,” he said presently. “Oil ship. Must have been torpedoed. She’s leaving a trail of blazing oil on the water astern of her.” For half an hour they watched the conflagration grow brighter as the Destroyer rapidly overhauled the burning derelict. Finally the Gunner ranged alongside his Commanding Officer. “She’s making way through the water, sir—yawing too. Best give her a wide berth.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “Keep to windward. There can’t be anybody below. I expect the heat of

the fire is keeping the steam pressure up. . . . My ghost! What a blaze!"

The ship was now plainly discernible, blazing furiously from forecastle to poop. The wind whipped pennons of flame hundreds of feet to leeward, and from started rivets and gaping seams streams of liquid fire poured blazing into the sea. The ship was blundering along at a good seven knots, swerving blindly from side to side like a wounded bull, and leaving on the troubled surface of the water a fiery, serpentine trail of burning oil. The hissing crackle of the flames and roar of the wind, the constant eruption of vast columns of sparks that belched hundreds of feet into the air and floated to leeward, made the doomed ship a terrifying and almost demoniac spectacle.

"Can't be a soul alive on board," said the First Lieutenant. "Just as well—ugly customer to tackle."

They ranged abeam, giving the blazing derelict a wide berth, and even at that distance felt their cheeks scorch. Men lined the Destroyer's lee rail, watching in shocked silence. To the seaman the fairest of all sights is a ship upon the sea; a ship wrecked upon a lee shore or even plunging beneath the surface with racing propellers is a sad, though not unnatural sight, prompting the heart of every sailor to the rescue, whatever the risk. But a ship on fire, even though abandoned, is repellent, horrible beyond the power of description.

172 An Awfully Big Adventure

The Gunner suddenly emitted an oath and extended an arm and pointing forefinger :

"Look, sir! Fore-peak! There's some men there!"

The Captain stared through his binoculars.

"Yes," he said calmly; "you're right. They'll be grilled alive if her head falls away from the wind. Starboard ten, Quartermaster."

Obedient to her helm, the Destroyer closed that blinding hell-glare, and presently to the naked eye a score of human figures were visible, huddled into the eyes of the ship. The Lieutenant on the Destroyer's bridge picked up a megaphone and bawled through it.

"Why don't they jump, the damned fools?" he demanded angrily. "They must have seen us. They know we'll pick them up." The Destroyer came closer, plunging and rolling in the seaway. The figures on the bridge shielded their faces from the scorching heat as every eye watched the hungry flames licking their way forward along the oiler's forecastle. Her foremast fell with a crash, sending up a great column of fire into the outraged sky. By its glare the faces of the huddled figures were plainly visible: beardless, with high cheek-bones, distorted with terror like the masks of trapped animals.

"God!" ejaculated the First Lieutenant. "Chinks! They're all Chinese! No wonder they wouldn't jump! Can't swim!"

The Captain thrust him towards the ladder.

"Stand by with fenders the port side. Get the hand-pumps going. I'll run her alongside."

"Gawd 'elp us!" muttered the Gunner, and as he spoke the burning ship yawed suddenly and came bearing down on them.

From first to last it was less than five minutes' work. With paint blistered and scorched clothing, rails and davits bent, with cold fear in their hearts and a sense of duty that mastered all, that prodigy of seamanship was accomplished. Twenty-four jabbering Chinese firemen and a dazed Scotch mate flopped down pell-mell on to the Destroyer's upper deck, and received the gift of life at the hands of a young man in a singed duffle coat, who said nothing, whose breath came and went rather fast through dilated nostrils.

"Twenty-five," reported the First Lieutenant when he had mustered the rescued and the Destroyer was racing landward, "and twenty-four of 'em Chinks. You risked your ship for a couple of dozen yellow-bellies!"

"Maybe I did," replied his Captain. Dawn was paling the Eastern sky, and he loosened the duffle coat about his throat. "Maybe I did. I ain't the Hohangho."

A FORTY-FOOT SETTING

THE tramp that had done the damage lay rolling lazily in the long, smooth swell, blowing off steam. Her escort of two Destroyers—or more properly a Destroyer and a half—was some distance away, exchanging a highly-seasoned and technical dialogue through megaphones. In the course of an unpremeditated zigzag a quarter of an hour earlier the tramp had rammed one of her escort and cut her in two.

The combination of misunderstandings which culminated in this mishap was at the moment in process of review on the bridge of the tramp. Her master, who was a Portuguese, and the mate, who hailed from Pernambuco, in the apportioning of blame were for once in agreement; the Chinese Quartermaster called, weeping, upon his ancestors' gods to witness they lied. Each spake his own tongue, and the babel of their strife mingled with the thin hiss of escaping steam, to be engulfed by the vast blue loneliness of the sky.

The Captain of the rammed Destroyer (his age was twenty-five and his vocabulary one Methuselah need not have been ashamed of) transferred his ship's

company to the other escort and made a cursory survey of the damage.

The bulkhead forward of the gaping cavity was holding—precariously, it is true, but still holding. Therefore the fore part of the crippled Destroyer continued to float; the after portion, since the sea was smooth and the swell slight, although sagged below the surface, continued attached to the remainder by a few twisted longitudinals of steel and some mangled plates. The unhurt Destroyer having embarked the shipwrecked crew, ranged alongside her damaged sister, and proclaimed her intention of passing a towing hawser.

The Captain of the cripple filled and lit a pipe while he considered the problem from the vantage of the midship funnel of his command, which lolled drunkenly in a horizontal posture athwart the upper deck.

"Not yet," he shouted, and turned to the Gunner, who stood knee-deep in water where once a torpedo-tube had been. "It's that cursed depth-charge I'm worrying about. It's still in the chute at the stern, and set to explode at a depth of forty feet."

The Gunner nodded, and bent forward to peer through the translucent depths at what had been, a quarter of a hour before, the dwelling-place of both. Somewhere beneath the surface, still affixed to the submerged stern, was the Destroyer's main anti-submarine armament—her depth-charges. One had been

176 An Awfully Big Adventure

in the tray, ready set for instant release by the jerk of a lever, when the collision occurred.

"If the stern breaks off, that depth-charge'll sink with it, and explode when it gets down to forty feet."

"That's right, sir," said the Gunner, with melancholy calm.

"And the explosion 'll rip this bulkhead out of her, and down the fore part will go. Half a ship's better'n none, Mr. Hasthorpe."

Mr. Hasthorpe agreed, but inclined to the view that he'd rather have kept the other half, given a choice in the matter.

"There was a nice li'l drum o' paint aft there we had give us at Taranto, sir, an' some ostridge feathers under my bunk, what I'd promised my old woman."

A long, sleek swell passed beneath them on its unhurried path from Africa to the Adriatic. The dark wreckage beneath the surface stirred like weed in a current, and the deck plating under their feet trembled ominously as the hulk rolled.

"A few more of those," said the youthful Captain, "and down goes the after part. I shall lose my ship." The speaker had rather less than half a ship to lose, but he scrambled down on to the buckled plating of the upper deck, hastily unbuttoning his drill tunic.

"That depth-charge must be set to 'safe,' then it can't explode, however far it sinks."

"It's a couple of fathoms below the surface. I

ain't no Annette Kellerman meself," said the Gunner.

His Captain waved the dinghy alongside. "That's nothing. I'll have a shot for it—if I can only find the beastly thing in all that tangle."

"An' if another swell passes when you're in the water, sir, likely as not the stern'll drop off an'——" The sentence remained unfinished, for his Captain had slipped over the side into the waiting dinghy and was busily divesting himself of his clothes.

"You'd better get clear," he shouted to his confrère in the other Destroyer, "till I've finished. No I'm not going to bathe!" He explained the situation while the dinghy man rested on his oars and musingly contemplated the big toe of his left foot round which a shred of spun yarn was twisted. The Captain of the other Destroyer raised his arm to show he understood; the telegraph gongs clanged, and the Destroyer moved away from the side of the derelict. The dinghy paddled a few strokes, and the nude pink figure in the stern bent down and stared into the water.

"Right," he said presently. "Keep the boat there, Simmonds." He took a few deep breaths, standing on the after thwart, and then dived.

The oarsman leaned over the gunwale and held his breath, gazing under the boat like a man in a trance.

After all the tumult of the collision the moment

178 An Awfully Big Adventure

was one of deathly stillness. The tramp lay black against the sunlight half a mile away. The Destroyer was turning in a wide circle, with a flick of white under her stern, and close at hand, amid the wreckage of the still floating unfortunate, the Gunner stood motionless, staring.

The dinghy man suddenly sat upright and took a stroke with one paddle. The head and shoulders of the Lieutenant-in-Command broke the oily surface with an abrupt splash. He gripped the stern of the dinghy and heaved himself out of the water. Then, stark and dripping, he stood upright, transfigured by the Mediterranean sunshine into a figure of shining gold, and, raising his arms above his head, semaphored two letters to the watching Destroyer—"OK," finishing with a triumphant wave of the hand.

A thin cheer broke out along the crowded rail, the syren sounded a toot of congratulation, and as the resultant wisp of steam dissolved in the air the dinghy suddenly rose, rocked on the slope of a passing swell, and dropped down its smooth flank. The portion of the Destroyer that remained afloat rolled twice; there was a succession of big swirls in the water, an ugly grinding sound, and a snap. The Lieutenant-in-Command gave a short, hard laugh.

"There go your peacock feathers," he said to the Gunner, as he climbed on board the wrecked remnant of his command.

"Ostridge," amended Mr. Hasthorpe, and clam-

bered forward to the towing bollard and the preliminaries of a piece of seamanship that brought half a Destroyer safely to the dock a hundred and seventy miles away.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The foregoing are based on actual occurrences in the War, and, as far as the author is aware, conform to fact. The characters are imaginary; their words and thoughts those of the writer's imagination.

IV

THE ACTION BETWEEN H.M.S. *PRIZE* AND GERMAN SUBMARINE U 93

(1917)

THE German submarine U 93 sailed from Emden on Friday, April 13, 1917, on her maiden trip to the Atlantic. She carried eighteen torpedoes and 500 rounds of ammunition for her two 3.9 mm. guns; her complement consisted of thirty-seven officers and men, under the command of Captain Lieutenant E. Freiherr Spiegel von und zu Peckelsheim.

A tendency on the part of the crew to regard the date as ill-omened was met by the Commander with the assurance that the combination of Friday and the figure thirteen would cancel any bad luck usually associated with either.

About 8.30 P.M. (Greenwich time) on April 30 U 93 was in approximately Latitude $49^{\circ} 40'N$, Longitude $11^{\circ} 40'W$., making her way back to Germany with the sinking of eleven merchant ships to her discredit.

The Commander of U 93 was more than satisfied with the result of his cruise: moreover, he had two horses running in the Berlin races during the second week in May, and was anxious to be back in time for

the event. But on sighting the sails of a small top-sail schooner coming over the horizon, he decided to delay his return a few hours and complete the round dozen of ships sunk; also the size of the schooner would, he judged, round off his tonnage figures evenly.

He opened fire on the schooner at three miles range, and, as this was the last ship to be sunk during the trip, gave orders that all men who could be spared from their duties below might come on deck and witness the sinking.

The schooner in question was His Majesty's Ship *Prize* of 200 tons, commanded by Lieutenant William Edward Saunders, Royal Naval Reserve, with two 12-pounders concealed in collapsible deck-houses, and one aft on a disappearing mounting under the hatch-way covers of the after hold. She also carried two Lewis guns, and was incidentally the first German prize (then called the *Else*) captured by Great Britain on the outbreak of war.

In complete ignorance of these details, however, the Commander of U 93 turned his submarine in a wide circle in order to close his victim cautiously from astern, firing in a leisurely manner from his foremost gun as he approached.

Immediately the submarine opened fire the alarm gongs sounded on board the *Prize*. With the exception of the Commanding Officer and Skipper Meade, R.N.R. (Trawler Section), who were concealed inside the steel companion-cover amidships,

182 An Awfully Big Adventure

and six hands in charge of Skipper Brewer, R.N.R. (Trawler Section), every man threw himself flat on the deck under cover of the bulwarks and crawled to his action-station, where he lay awaiting orders. The two foremost guns were in charge of the second-in-command, Lieutenant William D. Beaton, Royal Naval Reserve, who lay at the foot of the foremast with his ears to the voice-pipe from the Captain's observation position.

The ship's head was put up into the wind, and the six hands in charge of Mr. Brewer, who formed what was technically known as a "panic party," launched the small boat and abandoned the ship with every outward symptom of haste and disorder. The time was then 8.45 P.M.

The ship's head fell away to eastward, and the enemy slowly followed her round, still firing at her in a deliberate manner. Of two shots that hit the water-line and burst inside the ship, one put the auxiliary motor-engine out of action, wounding the Stoker Petty Officer in charge; and the other shattered the wireless-room, wounding the operator inside it. The cabins and mess-room were wrecked, the mainmast shot through in two places, and the ship began to make water fast.

In spite of this heavy punishment and the intensity of the strain, the guns' crews remained motionless on the deck while the submarine drew closer. She was invisible to all on board the schooner except the two figures inside the companion, who through

slits in the plating were able to watch her movements and communicate the closing range to the guns.

With unrelaxed caution, however, the submarine continued to approach slowly from astern, and it was on this precise bearing that none of the schooner's guns would bear. The leaden minutes dragged by like an eternity. The Commanding Officer of the *Prize* several times left his place of observation and crawled on hands and knees from man to man, steadying them and impressing on them the necessity for keeping out of sight. One of the port foremost gun's crew, a lad of eighteen, twitched uncontrollably with excitement like a galvanised frog as he sprawled face-downwards.

"What are you tremblin' about?" demanded the gun-layer in a hoarse, contemptuous whisper. "You can only die onest."

Twenty minutes passed thus in almost intolerable suspense. Then the crew of the after gun, straining their ears for the slightest sound, heard the fitting to which the patent-log line was attached splinter as it was wrenched away from its screws. The submarine had closed until she fouled the schooner's log-line and carried it away.

The next moment U 93 put her helm to starboard and glided out on to the port quarter of the schooner at seventy yards' clear range.

It was then 9.5 P.M., and Lieutenant Saunders, satisfied at last that his guns would bear, shouted,

184 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Down screens! Open fire!" At the same moment the White Ensign was hoisted.

The Shipwright, whose duty it was to release the after-gun screen, knocked the catch and the hatchway cover slid back like the front of an American roll-top desk. With the jerk of a lever the gun rose into position and opened fire two seconds later.

The foremost gun's crew leaped to their feet, and the deck-houses collapsed simultaneously, unmasking the foremost twelve-pounders.

The enemy was not easily taken by surprise, however. As the White Ensign appeared above the bulwarks of the *Prize*, the submarine fired two rounds from her guns. One hit the schooner's superstructure, and the other the water-line. This shell burst in the interior of the ship, severely wounding the Shipwright, who had rushed below to fetch one of the Lewis guns which were kept at the bottom of the ladder.

The Commander of the submarine put his helm hard over with the intention of ramming the schooner, but realising that she was inside his turning circle, reversed his helm and tried to escape. The next moment a shell from the schooner's after gun struck the foremost gun of the submarine, blowing it to atoms and annihilating the crew.

The Commanding Officer of the *Prize*, on realising that the submarine was heading away from him, rang down the order for full speed to the engine-room. Unknown to him, however, one engine was

completely disabled, and the other, after driving the ship for about one hundred yards, also stopped. There was practically no wind, and the ship lay motionless on the water.

In the meanwhile, however, the gunlayer of the after gun had hit the conning tower of the submarine with his second shot, and demolished it; a deck-hand at the same time raked the remainder of the survivors off her deck with the Lewis gun. A third shot from the after twelve-pounder struck the submarine in the vicinity of the engine-room and disabled her, but she continued to carry her way until about 500 yards from the *Prize*, when she came to a standstill, slewing broadside on to her vanquisher. There were no survivors visible, and a dull red glare from internal fires showed through the rents in her hull. At the thirty-sixth round she sank stern first, four minutes after the commencement of the action.

The "panic party" in the boat were then ordered to pull over the scene of the action and search for survivors. Darkness was falling fast, but they succeeded in picking up the Commander of the submarine, who had been knocked overboard by one of the bodies blown from the foremost gun, the Navigating Warrant Officer, and a Stoker Petty Officer. No other survivors could be found, and the boat returned with the prisoners, conscientiously "covered" by a Browning pistol in the fist of the Trawler Skipper at the helm.

While the search for survivors was being carried

186 An Awfully Big Adventure

out by the ship's boat a survey of the damage on board the schooner revealed a serious state of affairs. The water was pouring through the shot-holes and stood a foot deep between decks. It continued to gain in spite of the employment of every available man on pumping and bailing, and the temporary plugging of the holes with hammocks and blankets.

Fortunately the sea was calm, with very little or no wind. The ship was put on the port tack and every possible device employed to list her to starboard, all the damage she had received being on the port side. The boat was swung out at the starboard davits and filled with water, coal and water shifted to the starboard side, and both cables ranged along the starboard scuppers. By these means sufficient list was obtained to lift the shot-holes clear of the water and to enable them to be temporarily patched.

Immediately after boarding the *Prize* the German submarine Commander offered his word of honour to make no attempt to escape, and promised that he and his men would do all in their power to assist. His parole was accepted, and both he and his men set to with a will, prisoners and captors working side by side to save the ship. The Navigating Warrant Officer voluntarily attended to the wounded and dressed their wounds.

As soon as it was realised that the water was no longer gaining on them, the attention of the Commanding Officer of the *Prize* was devoted to an

attempt to restarting the motors. In the course of this work a fire broke out in the engine-room, due to sparks from the motor igniting the oil which had leaked from the damaged tank. This was successfully extinguished, and the wounded Stoker Petty Officer, assisted by the German Stoker Petty Officer, succeeded in getting one motor started. By 11.45 P.M. on April 30 all sail was set, and with one engine working the *Prize* shaped a course for the Irish Coast, 120 miles to the north-eastward.

Land was not sighted until the afternoon of May 2, during which time the crew, assisted by the prisoners, laboured at the pumps day and night. They were finally picked up 5 miles to the westward of the Old Head of Kinsale by one of H.M. Motor Launches and towed into Kinsale Harbour. Here two of the wounded were disembarked, and improvised leak-stoppers, made out of the pieces of plank with blankets stretched over them, were bolted over the shot-holes.

On May 4 the *Prize*, with her three prisoners still on board, left Kinsale Harbour in tow of one of H.M. Drifters, and arrived at Milford Haven, where she was based, at 8 A.M. on May 4.

During the passage an enemy minelaying-submarine was sighted on the surface to the southward about two miles away. The crew of the *Prize* immediately went to "Action Stations" in the hope that the enemy would close to within effective range, and for an hour they waited in tense excitement, while the

188 An Awfully Big Adventure

submarine steered a parallel course to theirs. Apparently, however, her caution got the better of her curiosity, for she finally drew ahead and was not seen again. The remainder of the voyage passed uneventfully.

His Majesty the King, in recognition of the conspicuous gallantry displayed by the Officers and men of the *Prize*, was pleased to award the Victoria Cross to Lieutenant W. E. Saunders, who was also promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Commander, Royal Naval Reserve.

Lieutenant W. D. Beaton, R.N.R., the Second-in-Command, was made a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order, the two Skippers, R.N.R. (T), were decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross, and the remainder of the ship's company received the Distinguished Service Medal.

A few months later H.M.S. *Prize*, under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Saunders, V.C., R.N.R., was lost with all hands, presumably as the result of an engagement with one or more enemy submarines. The death of this most gallant officer and his efficient and highly trained crew was a disaster the Navy and the nation could ill afford.

V

THE FORFEIT

(1916)

I

THE sun was sinking low behind the peach-trees when workers from the rice-fields came straggling back to the village. By twos and threes they came, toil-stained women and boys, with here and there an old, gnarled man, their shadows long on the road before them.

Tani, maker of sandals, looked up from his work as each one came abreast his shop, responding gravely to the low-voiced, musical greetings. But after the last worker had passed, his eyes, shaded beneath the palm of his hand, still sought the road beyond the village in patient expectancy.

Presently he heard the distant click of clogs, and a little figure came in sight. Her cotton kimono was looped to the knees, the mud of the paddy-fields still clung to her slender brown limbs. She drew near.

"Greeting, Su Su O!"

"Greeting, Tani!" The girl paused before the shop, with quaint genuflection and the gentle hiss of indrawn breath that in Japan is a courtesy. The sandal-maker sat back on his heels.

190 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Tired, Su Su O?"

"Very," replied the girl. She moved the heavy, mud-caked hoe from her shoulder and leaned on the haft, looking down at him with a little smile. Her mouth, with its geranium-scarlet lips, drooped wearily at the corners when in repose: her whole attitude betrayed fatigue.

The man frowned. "It is not well, Su Su O, that you should do coolie work. You are not of coolie stock, nor yet of coolie strength. Su Su O, hearken yet again! Be my wife! Come and live with me here, and let me labour for us both! I need you so, little Flower. I want you for my wife . . . not to see you only at sunrise and dusk, passing my dwelling by."

The sun set swiftly; swiftly the purple night swept up over rice-field and cherry-orchard. Here and there along the village street a coloured lantern glowed suddenly out of the darkness; through the frail oiled-paper walls of the cottages drifted the voices of children and the tinkle of a *samisen*. The sandal-maker stood up and took the girl's hand in his.

"I am lonely without you, Su Su O," he pleaded.

Her lip quivered. "I too am lonely, Tani; but I am a beggar—a coolie girl without father or mother. I cannot marry you: I have no dowry. I can bring nothing to the wedding—save myself, in rags. It would bring disgrace upon us."

In vain he pleaded, all the poetic imagery of the Asiatic upon his tongue. In vain he scoffed at convention—that terrible, inexorable convention of the East; still the dainty head shook in plaintive negation. Some unknown strain in her blood set honour before love, bowed to the decrees that had ruled her unknown forbears. At length, as if fearing that her resolution might weaken from sheer physical weariness—and she loved very dearly too—she turned towards the village.

“I must go, Tani. It is of no avail. . . . Nay, entreat me not further. . . . Nay, Tani, I am so tired. . . .”

The sandal-maker stepped back among his wares. Punctiliously they went through the little ceremony of genuflection and gesture. Click-click went the clogs up the narrow street, and among the shadows the sandal-maker stood with head bent, as if listening, long after the sound had died away.

That evening a traveller came to the village, a little wizened man, clad somewhat incongruously in a grey silk kimono, a bowler hat, and elastic-sided boots. Rumour whispered that he was the owner of a fashionable *cha-ya* (tea-shop) in Tokyo, renowned for the beauty of its Geishas. Gossip spreading quickly from door to door supplemented this as the night wore on. The honourable stranger was touring the country on the look-out for pretty girls. He paid well, they said, and his establishment was much frequented by Europeans, who, as all the world

192 An Awfully Big Adventure

knows, part freely with the *sen*. Here was a chance for a girl with looks!

The old gentleman was sipping saki in the guest-room of the village inn when Su Su O was announced. His keen old eyes noted with appreciation the lines of the childish figure as she bowed her forehead to the matting. But when she raised herself to her knees, and faced him with downcast eyes, he pursed up his mouth as if contemplating a whistle. Had he been a European he probably would have whistled, but this is not an art practised among owners of *cha-ya*. Otherwise his face was expressionless.

"Who is your mother?" he inquired, breaking the silence.

"She is dead, most honourable one. A peasant woman. I reside at the house of Matsu the charcoal-burner and his wife."

"And your father?"

"I do not know, O honourable one."

"Ah!" said her interlocutor, as if something had been explained that he did not understand. Peasants do not beget daughters with hair like Su Su O's, nor with ears like tiny pink shells, nor yet slender wrists and fingers. "And you wish to be a Geisha?"

Su Su O prostrated herself in silent acquiescence.

"I will take you on condition that you remain with me three years." The heart of Su Su O sank. Would Tani wait three years? "And I will pay

you"—he named what was to the girl a considerable sum. That clinched it: with a dowry like this she could marry Tani over and over again. Yet her fingers trembled as she painted her signature to the indentures, and her heart was sick at the thought of the parting. Even "passing his dwelling by" was better than never seeing it at all. But she left for Tokyo the next day, and a few moments were all that she had for saying good-bye.

"Oh, but you *will* wait?" she pleaded. "It will soon pass, the three years, and I will come back rich, and—marry you, Tani."

Tani's reply, in flowery Japanese, was to the effect that he would wait a hundred million years if necessary.

*

*

*

*

*

Her life in the Tokyo tea-house was no worse than that led by the thousands of other Geishas in the great straggling city. In some respects it was better, because European tourists of many nationalities frequented the establishment, and her beauty was such as to appeal not only to Japanese ideas, but Western as well. For one thing, her cheek-bones were not accentuated; and her mouth, scarlet-lipped and tremulous at times with laughter, you would have thought adorable whatever part of the world you hailed from. Also there was something very bewitching about her plaintive love-ditties (even if you couldn't understand them), which she sang in a minor

194 An Awfully Big Adventure

key to guitar accompaniment through her inconsiderable nose.

One day there came to the house a German officer on leave from Tsingtau. He was a big, bearded youth with blue eyes, and—this was a ceaseless wonder and delight to the Geishas—the centre of his front upper row of teeth was crowned with a diamond.

Attracted by the glitter in his mouth, and inured to the oafish attentions of European customers, she suffered him to put his arm round her. Without further warning, he lowered his bearded face and kissed her publicly on the lips.

To the Japanese mind the act was an indignity—worse, indecent. With a deft wriggle she twisted an arm free and struck him in the face, her eyes blazing. The big man laughed uproariously, imprisoned her arm, and kissed her again and again, while she quivered helplessly. Released at length, she faced him like a tiger-cat.

“Swine!” she cried. “Son of a foreign swine!”—and struck the piece of gold that he extended towards her out of his hand.

2

The railway terminus at Tokyo was gay with bunting and thronged by a great crowd of people. A brass band somewhere out of sight broke into crashing martial music. “*Banzai!*” roared the khaki-clad

figures in the closely packed carriages, and in response the women and children waved little hand-flags that bore the national emblem on a white ground.

Japan had declared war on Germany, and the occasion was the departure of a Reserve Division which was shortly to operate against the German fortress of Tsingtau. The windows of the carriages were blocked by grim, fighting faces: men from the North. Among them was Tani, sometime maker of sandals; and on the platform beneath his window, like a painted butterfly hovering round the cannon's mouth, stood Su Su O, eyes suspiciously bright.

"Return if the gods will it!" she whispered, echoing the murmured farewells of mothers, wives, and lovers. The grim memories of ten years ago still lingered. The vaulted roof of the terminus had echoed so many farewells; so few who parted amid the roars of "*Banzai!*" had greeted one another again. "If the gods will," said the women now, and the younger men still shouted "*Banzai!*" in reply. But at the last, as the long train steamed slowly out of the station, the finite human heart held sway. The oft-repeated "*Banzai!*" changed to "*Sai-onara! Sai-i-onara!*"—the saddest, most plaintive-sounding farewell yet fashioned by the human tongue.

A month later found Tani leading a moist and somewhat precarious existence in a trench before Tsingtau. His recollection of the siege since he took part in it had been a series of blurred impressions,

196 An Awfully Big Adventure

mud being predominant throughout. It had seemed an eternity of mud, of ceaseless rifle and artillery fire, of being soaked to the skin, of cold, hunger, and fatigue. Once or twice there had been moments of ferocious hand-to-hand fighting. They were good moments, those; and as he sat in the bottom of a trench cleaning the bolt of his rifle with a piece of oily rag, his thoughts recurred to them with a certain grim enjoyment.

By clearing away the earth at the top of the trench he was able to catch an occasional glimpse of his surroundings. An amphitheatre of barren hills, with the gleam of the sea in the far distance; a small, slow-moving speck upon it that was a Japanese or Allied warship shelling the fortress. Elsewhere, as far as he could see, the ground was scarred by bursting shell, and herring-boned by wire entanglements. Ahead, where the picric shells were pitching, a yellow cloud hung low, as the mists sometimes cling to the slopes of Fujiyama. There were intermittent points of jagged fire beneath the cloud; shrapnel bursting about the German redoubts.

It all represented to Tani a certain amount of uphill ground to be covered under fire: how soon he did not know, but the rest was familiar enough. The inferno of shell-fire that was bursting ahead would redouble till the mere contemplation of it almost stunned the senses. Then the order rippled along to advance: you leaped out of your trench and ran as well as you could across the débris of the last attack

and the chaos of barbed wire till the next trench was reached. Sometimes you just dropped into it and panted; sometimes you met other men there, fierce, blue-eyed men who had to be bayoneted. Bullets would shriek and whimper overhead, or hit something with a sullen "Zip!" Men grunted and seemed to fall asleep, or rolled over and lay twitching in a novel and rather ludicrous fashion. And there was the ceaseless rain, the smell of cordite smoke, the bewildering roar of the howitzers.

That was War, as understood by Tani, sometime maker of sandals.

Early one morning a flask of raw saki was passed along the advanced trench. Tani drank deep and tightened his belt, for he was hungry; the spirit ran through his veins like fire. "It is the end," said the man next to him, a battle-scarred veteran of Nogi's Army, with a queer note of exultation in his voice. There was a sudden lull in the firing. Whistles sounded shrilly.

An officer near Tani who had been divesting himself of his overcoat leapt to his feet with a shout. With an answering roar the trenches seemed to vomit wave upon wave of steel, and yellow-faced, khaki-clad figures. They swept forward, stabbing and cheering, hewing their way through the wire entanglement in the face of a tempest of bullets, leaving their dead dangling as they fell.

Tani reached a line of sandbags at the crest of a rise unhurt, and drove his bayonet into the chest of a

198 An Awfully Big Adventure

German who was clubbing his rifle. He heard the breast-bone crunch as the steel went home to the muzzle of the rifle. The German fell sideways, twisting the weapon out of Tani's grip with his weight. Then Tani saw a bearded officer, the haft of a broken sword dangling from a leather thong at his wrist, struggling to reload his revolver.

As a mongoose jumps for a snake the Japanese leapt at the German's throat. They fell together in the bottom of the trench, and for a moment they fought with their hands, in the welter of mud and water, trampled on by other combatants, breathing in short, savage gasps. Then Tani got the "neck-lock" he had been struggling for. Something snapped with a sound like a dry twig breaking, and the German's head dropped back. Tani sat up, spitting and wiping the mud out of his eyes. His adversary was dead, and lay staring up at the grey sky as if amazed. The bearded lips were drawn back, showing his teeth; one of these sparkled curiously. Save for the dead and wounded, the trench was deserted: the assault had swept forward. Above them was a sound of great cheering. Someone was wedging a colour-staff between the sandbags; the emblem of the Rising Sun, tattered and stained, stirred in the morning breeze. Tsingtau had fallen.

Tani leaned over to examine more closely the phenomenon in the dead man's mouth. Then he emitted an interested grunt. The centre tooth of the German's upper jaw was crowned with a diamond.

3

Tani, maker of sandals, leaned over the parapet of the little cedar-wood bridge that spanned an artificial lake in the temple grounds. Every now and again the moon's placid reflection on the water broke into widening ripples as a carp rose. In the stillness the sound of its feeding was audible—a tiny “gluck!” as if a greedy child were smacking its lips. It was late spring, the season of the cherry-blossom, and the light airs of evening came in puffs across the water, laden with faint fragrance. The doors of the temple stood open: inside, a lamp burned dully before the altar.

After a while the man took from his pocket a little pouch of oiled silk and emptied the contents into his palm. There was some dusty tobacco, two or three matches, and a small object that caught the light as he moved his hand. This he retained, and put the pouch and the rest of its contents back into his pocket.

“Click-click, click-click!” Light, metal-shod sandals were approaching from the direction of the village. A form fluttered towards him out of the darkness like a soft grey moth.

“Have you waited long, Tani?”

“So long, Su Su O, that the night had grown into Eternity, and the sound of my sighing checked the very lamentation of the frogs!”

She laughed in her delicious gurgling way, and pressed her face against his sleeve. He slipped one

200 An Awfully Big Adventure

hand beneath her chin, raising the flawless oval face to the full light of the moon.

"Thou art very beautiful," he said, half below his breath. "A thousand men assuredly have loved thee since we bade farewell."

Su Su O sighed. "But none have laid a finger on me in love, Tani—save one, and him I struck."

The man smiled a little, and then his face grew grave. He fretted with the sling which supported his left arm. "What manner of man was he, this love-besotted fool?"

"A German, Tani; a man of great stature, bearded, with a jewel set in the centre tooth of his upper jaw."

Tani released her chin. "A diamond, belike, Little Flower?"

She nodded assent. "And by force he kissed me—upon the mouth."

"Ah!" For a moment the sandal-maker stared across the water, his eyes narrowed into slits, his face inscrutable. Then, with a sudden jerk of the wrist, he sent something spinning through the air—something that glittered like a point of flame in the moonlight. It fell with a splash, scaring the lazy carp that lay just beneath the surface.

"He has paid his forfeit," said Tani grimly.

All uncomprehending, Su Su O nestled against him and slipped her slender hand into his. Together they turned towards the temple.

VI

SUPPER BEER

(1914)

I

WITH the turn of the tide the wind backed and swept a wet mist in from the sea. During the day promenaders had thronged the stone pier that partly encircled the deserted harbour; townspeople for the most part—stolid, sombre-clad folk, taking their constitutionals soberly, as if they formed part of some inflexible schedule that regulated their lives. In the afternoons a sprinkling of infantrymen from the fort intermingled with them; loose-limbed young conscripts in grey uniforms, with heads too small for their bodies—a phenomenon partly accounted for by the zeal of the garrison barber, and partly by the size of their grotesque boots.

Now, however, as the evening set in with every promise of dirty weather, the promenaders turned in pairs towards the town. The angler who had been fishing in the shelter of the stone beacon slowly wound in his lines, gathered together his paraphernalia, and departed also. A watchman, carrying a short ladder over his shoulder, came and examined the automatic revolving gear of the lantern,

202 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

and after polishing the reflector, briskly returned to the town, taking his ladder with him.

With the exception of a solitary figure pacing backwards and forwards under the lee of the rough wall, the pier was soon deserted. But this figure's constitutional appeared to partake of the nature of a vigil, for every few minutes he paused and stared seaward into the mist through a pair of binoculars.

His face, as much of it as was visible above the collar of his ulster, was that of an elderly man, thin and aristocratic-looking. When not gazing out to sea, he contemplated his slow-pacing feet with mild, thoughtful blue eyes through rimless pince-nez. One cheek-bone was ornamented by a duelling-sabre scar.

Half an hour passed, while the spray drifted over the sea-wall and collected under-foot in shallow pools that alternately mirrored the waning light and darkened as a fresh gust of wind hurled itself in from the North Sea. Out at the entrance to the harbour a solitary gull faced the wind with steady beats of its powerful wings, calling with querulous persistency. Lights were beginning to twinkle here and there along the deserted sea-front when the watcher at the pier-head lowered his glasses, hastily wiped the lenses, and raised them again to his eyes. Then he made a guttural observation in an undertone.

Out of the grey smudge of sea and sky a small vessel suddenly became an object distinct, making for the mouth of the harbour : a short, squat craft, with high bows and a tall raking funnel set far aft. To

judge by the derricks topped up to her mainmast she had every appearance of being a trawler; yet for a trawler returning in the height of the fishing season she gave evidence of very empty holds by the buoyancy of her movements. She carried no lights, though the dusk was now settling fast.

A short, thick-set man in a blue jersey stood at the wheel; at his side was a younger man, a tall, upright figure muffled in a thick pilot coat. The crew, with the exception of two who were getting ready to make the vessel fast, stood in a group in the waist. For a North Sea trawler the complement of hands appeared somewhat in excess of the usual requirements.

The man at the helm brought the vessel smoothly alongside without acknowledging the presence of the watcher on the pier. His companion, however, smiled a greeting, raised his hand as if to salute, and checked himself. As the trawler went astern and her way slackened, he jumped out and joined the figure in the ulster.

"Well?" asked the elder man.

"Absolutely successful! Twenty-four, all told. I got right across to within ten miles of their coast."

The other gave an abrupt, disconcerting laugh. "You laid them in fours, as you were ordered?"

The young man nodded. "They cannot miss them. And if a ship fails to touch one direct she must cross one of the wires that connect them. The impetus of her speed will swing them aft against her

204 An Awfully Big Adventure

side—two on each side. . . . *Or* three on one and one on the other . . . ! Then——!” The speaker made a graceful upward gesture with his hands and smiled.

“And you were not sighted?”

“Once. The fog lifted a little, and one of their Light Cruisers must have seen us. But I was flying their flag——” He laughed again. “Oh, they are fools! Fools! They had time to blow us out of the water six times over before I could slip back into the fog again.” The speaker lit a cigarette and moistened his dry lips. “Then I came back as quickly as possible. And now I want my supper and some beer—it’s thirsty work, that—that trawling in the North Sea!” He took a Service revolver out of the side pocket of his coarse reefer jacket and extracted the cartridges from it as they walked along the deserted quay.

His companion took his arm affectionately. “My dear boy,” he ejaculated. “Beer! Come along! You shall have a gallon—you have earned it! Herr Gott in Himmel! You shall swim in it if you like.”

2

It was the supper hour on board the Cruiser, and the “watch below” were enjoying their leisure, after the fashion of the sailor-man, along the crowded batteries. The sailor’s meal, especially in war time, is a satisfy-

ing affair ; but he does not linger over it as one lingers over the tea-table ashore. For one thing, the surroundings are cramped and stuffy, and the time is short ; there are other needs more pressing : there is a duck jumper to be scrubbed by to-morrow perhaps ; or a few more inches to be added to the wonderful patchwork quilt destined some day to be the pride and ornament of somebody's home. Besides, on deck one can smoke a pipe.

The battery was thronged with men ; many were sitting in pairs at a mess-kettle, up to their elbows in soap-suds ; forward by the break of the forecastle the ship's barber was reaping a rich harvest of pennies—"penny a shave and twopence hair-cut" is the recognised tariff. A sewing-machine whirled busily in the lee of a gun-shield ; the crew "standing by" the gun exchanged lazy chaff with the bearded sempster. Their watch was nearly at an end, and with the prospect of a meal ahead the sailor brightens wonderfully. The ship's pet goat wandered from group to group, gravely accepting the attentions—cigarettes, banana-skins, and the like—that came his way during stand-easy.

Out of the wreaths of fog and tobacco-smoke forward drifted presently the strains of an accordion——

"It's a long, long way to Tipperary. . . ." The voices of the men, singing under their breath as they worked, blended restfully with the throb of the engines and the swish of water past the ship's side.

A little breeze sprang up, tearing rifts here and

206 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

there in the surrounding fog; a few pale gleams of sunlight filtered through, and on the fore-bridge of the Cruiser the Yeoman of Signals raised his glass and steadied it against the topmost rail. Suddenly he stiffened like a pointer.

"Trawler right ahead, sir!" His lynx-like eye and almost lifelong training told before the others could see anything. The Captain stepped out of the tiny chart-house, where he had been busy with the chart and a pair of dividers.

"There, sir." The Officer of the Watch extended his arm and forefinger. The Navigating Lieutenant joined them, and together they peered through the shifting veil of vapour.

"Yes, I see. . . ." The Captain adjusted his glasses the fraction of a degree. "She's flying our colours . . . Can you see her number . . . ?" The Officer of the Watch moved to the voice-pipe, as if to give an order to the helmsman.

"No; steady as you go!" said the Captain. "She's a mile away yet. I want to see her a bit closer—ah . . ." He broke off disgustedly as the fog closed down on them again, blotting out the pale sunlight. The distant trawler vanished as a picture vanishes from the screen when a hand withdraws the lantern slide. The Captain blinked as the tiny beads of moisture collected on his eyelashes, and rubbed his glasses impatiently. "Damn this fog! Put a look-out in the eyes of the ship." Going to the voice-pipe, he gave a curt order to the Quartermaster at the helm

and came back again to the compass. "I didn't like the look of that fellow, for all his display of bunting. Too many men on deck for one of our trawlers." He looked up into the blindfold drifts overhead. "Oh, for one little minute . . . !"

The Officer of the Watch had stepped to the head of the ladder and beckoned to a messenger :

"Jump down and tell the Captain of the Fore-castle to tell off a hand as look-out forward in the eyes of the ship. He's to get him there at once !"

"Aye, aye, sir !" The boy sped off on his errand and darted off along the upper deck. The petty officer whose official title was "Captain of the Fore-castle" was seated with his back against the engine-room casings, playing "crib" with a Chief Stoker. The messenger pulled up panting :

"Please—the—Officer—of—the—Watch—sez—tell—off—a—hand—to—look — out — in — the — eyes—of—the—ship !" he gasped. He had run so fast and spoke so quickly, in his fear lest he should forget the message, that to a less trained ear it would have sounded unintelligible.

The Captain of the Forecastle turned a clear grey eye upon him, and moistened a thumb preparatory to dealing. "Right, my son. . . . Nip along on to the fo's'cle an' pass the word to Able-Seaman Eggers—'e's one of the party standin' by the foremost gun—to get up quick 's 'ell into the eyes of the ship. Tell 'im to get back smart to 'is gun if 'e's wanted. An' then jump down to 19 Mess an' warn Able-Seaman Leckey

208 An Awfully Big Adventure

to relieve 'im nex' watch. Tell 'em both from me to keep their eyes skinned, or they'll get 'ung at the port fore-tops'l yard-arm!"

The boy departed as if wings were attached to his bare heels, his freckled face solemn with the burden of these grave responsibilities. In his Pantheon three deities presided over the affairs of men. There was Mr. Corbett the Boatswain, terrible in wrath, iron-handed, implacable, who drank rum (so rumour had it) as weak mortals drink swipes, and could put an eye-splice in a bit of six-inch wire single-handed in his sleep. . . . A more mysterious power was that invested in a trinity of Lieutenants known collectively as "Orficer-of-the-Watch"; and, lastly, there was the Captain of the Forecastle. But the greatest of these was the Captain of the Forecastle. Other gods there may have been, but they were too remote and magnificent to concern themselves about Boys 1st Class, or to be concerned about.

Able-Seaman Eggers was leaning against the shield of his gun, inhaling the delicate aroma of bloaters that drifted up from the ship's galley. He hoped his mess was going to have bloaters for supper; he liked them best when they had soft roes. . . . To him came Mercury, in the form of the fore-bridge messenger, repeating breathlessly the edict of the Captain of the Forecastle. Able-Seaman Eggers accepted the change of duties philosophically; he would as soon spend the remainder of his watch in the "eyes" of the ship as closed up round a gun.

"Oo sez?" he queried—not from any desire to question the order, but because it was necessary to maintain appearances before the Boy 1st Class who delivered it.

"Cap'n of the Forecastle. An' 'e sez you gotter keep your eyes skinned."

Able-Seaman Eggers cuffed the emissary of the Great Powers for form's sake, and betook himself into the foremost point of the "V" formed by the ship's bows.

*

*

*

*

*

Down in the Wardroom the occupants had finished tea; the Paymaster rose from the table, and crossed over to the notice-board, carrying a sheet of foolscap over which he had expended much thought and labour. He pinned it up, and stepped back a pace to admire the effect.

The Young Doctor came over to his side. "What are you up to, Pay?"

The other smiled in all the pride of authorship. "I don't know what you think, but I call that rather a neat bit of wit, eh?"

The notice read as follows:

"GRAND QUOITS COMPETITION."

"Subject to interference by atmospherics, barratry, mines, fog, lyddite shell bursting on board, and the King's enemies, it is proposed to hold the above in the dog watch whenever possible:

210 An Awfully Big Adventure

"First Prize—A good cigar.

"Second Prize—A blood orange.

"Third Prize—A bag of nuts.

"Penalty for throwing a quoit overboard :

"First Offence—Fined half a crown.

"Second Offence—Thrown overboard himself."

"And what'll he do the third time?" inquired the Surgeon, who was suspected of being Irish. "But anyway, it's a grand idea—let's go and play before the light gets too bad."

The Paymaster stepped into his cabin and returned with half a dozen discs of indiarubber. "I wheedled these out of the 'Chief.' Padre, come on and play quoits—you and I'll take on 'Pills' and the Gunnery Lieutenant."

"Never played in my life. I should probably chuck them down the funnel or hit the Skipper in the eye on the fore-bridge."

"That doesn't matter—it's your money we want. Come along, 'Guns,' we'll take these two on." The Paymaster led the way out of the Mess, followed by the other three.

A Lieutenant dozing in the one remaining arm-chair opened his eyes and watched their retreating backs. "Noisy devils," he murmured drowsily. "Why don't they sleep when they can?"—and lapsed into slumber again.

A Marine servant entered to remove the tea-things and tidy up the Mess. As a matter of fact,

there was not much to tidy: a table and the bare number of chairs required to accommodate the members was all the woodwork in the place. Two ash-trays that no one used stood on the stove, together with a novel, several pipes, and an open tin of tobacco. On the sideboard lay a little pile of newspapers a week old and a "Bradshaw"—pathetic reminder of the days when one looked up trains with a view to leave and suchlike vanities. A couple of war-maps ornamented the bulkhead: otherwise, the Mess—the home and place for sleep, meals, and recreation of a dozen English gentlemen—was bare and unadorned.

The voices of the quoit-players outside came in through the open door, mingling with the soft thud of the rubber quoits as they played. The figure in the arm-chair stirred slightly and smiled in his sleep.

* * * * *

Forward in the bows of the ship Able-Seaman Eggers leaned over the rail, staring into the mist. The ship's bows seemed to be carving their way through liquid jade that fell away on either side of the bows with a deep sobbing sound. He wondered when the bell would strike . . . he wanted his supper . . .

A blinding sheet of flame leaped into the air, hurling a mountain of water after it with a report that rent the fog in tatters.

What was left of the cruiser lifted half clear of the

212 An Awfully Big Adventure

water and lurched forward, sickened and stricken . . . her stern rose slowly in the air, the propellers kicking wildly.

After a while objects began to descend out of the riven patches of mist overhead—fragments of wood and steel, wisps of clothing still alight . . . shattered images of God . . .

Then, somewhere aft in the reeling hull, a magazine exploded. The cruiser sank as a bull sinks in the ring before the crowning mercy of the last thrust. A pall of smoke closed down upon the outraged sea.

3

In a ground floor room at the back of Portsmouth Hard an old woman was laying the table for supper. Not much of a supper: the remains of a loaf of bread, some dripping in a saucer. But the chief item of the meal, a bloater, lay on a plate in front of the fire, keeping warm.

An old man sat in a chair by the hearth, reading a newspaper through steel-rimmed glasses. Laying it aside, he leaned forward and prodded the bloater speculatively with a nubby forefinger. He turned and looked at his wife over the top of the steel-rimmed spectacles.

"It's a soft roe, Mother. 'E liked 'em wiv soft roe."

The woman had completed the arrangements for their meal, and was tying on her bonnet before the scrap of mirror that hung on the wall.

"Well, don' get pokin' it *about!*" she snapped, with unexpected vehemence that told of overstrung nerves. She took a jug off a nail on the dresser and covered it with her apron. There is an etiquette to be observed in these matters when one carries a beer-jug abroad. "I'm goin' out to fetch the beer for supper, an' when I come back you shall 'ave your bloater."

The old man nodded. "That's right; an' buy an evening paper 'fore you come back. P'raps we'll see some news of the boy. Pity 'e ain't 'ere to fetch the beer for supper same's 'e did use to. 'E should 'ave a gallon to 'isself if 'e wus 'ere this minute!" The old man chuckled.

The woman went out and closed the door behind her. The rays of the setting sun glowed red on the old tiled roofs and sparkled on the waters of the harbour. It was a golden evening, and a peaceful haze hung over the far-reaching Dockyard and the few ships lying at anchor in the distance.

The hoarse cry of a paper-boy arrested her attention, and she stopped outside a newsvendor's shop to read the contents bill of the evening paper. She read slowly, for she was no great scholar and her sight was not so good as it had been. Then she went

214 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

quickly into the shop and bought a copy of the paper.

NAVAL DISASTER IN THE NORTH SEA

BRITISH CRUISER SUNK BY MINES

FULL LIST OF CASUALTIES

The glaring type attracted several passers-by, amongst them a policeman on his beat. When the little old woman came out of the shop her face was screwed up with grief, and she held her apron to her eyes. Red eyes and tear-blotted faces are not uncommon in war-time in a garrison town. The bystanders that gathered round understood as if by common intuition, and the policeman spoke encouragement in a gruff, kindly tone. Standing there on the kerb, she had her cry. A Boy Scout held the jug her son would never carry again to fetch the supper beer.

VII

THE WAY THEY HAVE

(1915)

I

THE coastguard was turning over the earth in one of the tiny cabbage patches that belonged to the row of whitewashed cottages on the flank of the headland. The sun was hot and he paused frequently, straightening up and passing the back of his hand across his forehead. Each time he did this his eyes travelled half-mechanically round the blue curve of the horizon, thence along the foreshore, and so back to the cabbage patch, when he resumed his digging.

It was during one of these pauses that he noticed the gulls, and stood motionless for several seconds, shading his eyes from the sun. The tide had turned and left a few yards of sand below high-water mark wet and gleaming in the October sunlight.

Half a mile away a couple of gulls were circling curiously above something that lay in the shallow water, stranded by the fast-receding tide.

The coastguard watched the birds intently. The dark speck that broke the smooth shimmering surface of the sea might have been seaweed or driftwood, but for them. Seaweed interests nobody—not even sea-

216 An Awfully Big Adventure

gulls. On the other hand what interests sea-gulls interests coastguardmen. Acting apparently along this chain of reasoning, the coastguard dug his spade into the earth, and made off down the winding gravel path that led to the beach. Once on the sand he stopped, said something in an undertone, and glanced back at the coastguard station; he had come without his telescope.

For a moment he paused, measuring the distance with his eye. He was a man of leisurely and deliberate habit of mind. It was a question whether he went back for his telescope or walked along the foreshore and decided at close quarters what it was that the tide was shrinking from in the warm morning sunlight.

There wasn't much in it one way or the other, he decided after due reflection, and set out accordingly along the wet sands at the edge of the sea.

He was in no particular hurry. Whatever his vices, curiosity wasn't one of them. But it was his job; and as he walked he eyed the sea distastefully as if it had been responsible for more jobs than he personally had much use for.

One of the sea-gulls soared suddenly and flew swiftly out to sea with quick strong beats of its wings.

The other still hovered, as if questioning the sea with thin querulous cries. The coastguard drew near, and it too fled seaward, abandoning the enigma that lay with the little waves lapping round it in retreat.

The coastguard stopped at the edge of the water and stood with his hands on his hips contemplating the jetsam.

"Another of 'em," he said, and was for wading out there and then, till he remembered his wife and what she said the last time he went in with his boots on.

Accordingly he removed his boots and socks, rolled up his bell-bottomed trousers, and splashed out to where the thing was lying. He turned it over gingerly and he shook his head.

"'Dentity disc," he muttered, and pulling out his knife, severed the cord that connected a little metal disc to what lay at his feet.

Then he retraced his steps to where his boots were lying, examining the disc as he walked. Three rows of letters and some figures were stamped on it. With difficulty he deciphered them :

A. E. JONES,
TMR. R.N.R.T.

1347

BAP.

With more haste than he had hitherto exhibited the coastguard replaced his socks and boots and returned to the coastguard station.

His mate was examining a steam-drifter far out to sea through the big brass-bound high-power telescope. He turned as the new-comer entered. The latter threw the disc down on to the desk and stepped

218 An Awfully Big Adventure

to the telephone. "A. E. Jones," he said; "Trimmer, Royal Naval Reserve, Trawler Section, No. 1347. Religion, Baptist."

The other nodded, and resumed his scrutiny of the distant drifter. "Bin in the water long?" he inquired.

"Weeks," said the other, turning the handle of the telephone bell, "an' weeks." Then he picked up the receiver, and in half a dozen terse sentences set in motion that part of the vast and complex machinery of the British Admiralty interested in the affairs—even unto death—of R.N.R. (T.) No. 1347.

An hour later an immaculate young gentleman with paper protectors to his cuffs, who occupied a corner of a large dusty room overlooking Whitehall, was running his pen down the pages of a tome resembling in appearance the Doomsday Book. "J," he said. "Um—m—m. Jo—Jones—1347. Next of kin, mother. That's the fellah." Then he wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to a messenger, glanced at the clock, removed his paper protectors from his cuffs, and went off to his lunch, and the spiritual refreshment of twenty minutes' badinage with a rather coy waitress at a popular café.

His part in the drama was taken a couple of hours later by a Registrar of the Naval Reserve at a grimy Welsh seaport, who was also the Assistant Collector of Customs and a deacon at the local chapel; he, at the bidding of a curt telegram, pumped up the back tyre of his bicycle and rode some three miles along

a cobbled thoroughfare, till he came to a row of cottages that stared across an evil-looking canal at mounds of slag. He dismounted at the door of the third house and knocked. An old woman answered the summons, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Mrs. Jones?"

"Aye," said the old woman. "Have they found 'im?"

"They have," said the registrar grimly. "An' buryin' him they are to-morrow."

The old woman sat down in a chair and threw her apron over her head. "Anwl!" she wailed. "Anwl, Anwl! Seven year since I set eyes on 'im, an' then he did hit me a clout and went foreign—drinkin' he'd been . . . *Dhu! Dhu!* And me his mother."

The registrar entered the squalid room, drew a chair up beside the old woman, and, sitting down, prepared to enjoy himself.

"The *Ard-miralty*," he began sonorously, unfolding the telegram and clearing his throat; "the *Ard-miralty*, look you, gives me authority to pay your fare to the East Coast of England so's you can be present at the funeral, Mrs. Jones." Then, his voice rising to the triumphal mournful "*hoewl*"* of the Welsh preacher, he added, "Are not two sparrows sold for one farthing——!"

The old woman ceased to rock herself to and fro. Her head emerged from under her apron.

"Maggie Ann!" she cried shrilly.

* A sort of sing-song chanty.

220 An Awfully Big Adventure

A slovenly girl, with a sallow face, and masses of untidy hair twisted up in curl papers, crossed the yard at the back, and stood in the doorway.

"Get you out my black dress an' my red flannel petticoat, Maggie Ann."

The registrar eyed the girl sternly. "Have you got a black dress too?" he inquired.

"I have indeed," replied Maggie Ann simply. "In the pawnshop, it is."

The registrar consulted the telegram as if it contained directions as to the method of redeeming articles from pawn.

"I am authorised by the Ard-miralty to issue *two* tickets to the next of kin of the deceased." He cleared his throat and contemplated Maggie Ann. "I am prepared to give you one so's you can go to the funeral too."

"There's my married sister," said Maggie Ann reflectively, "with a black dress as would fit me——"

"Get it you from her," commanded the registrar majestically. "An' be at the station at 4 o'clock. I will find a train for you." His manner suggested that trains were things that took even a man a good deal of finding.

He was as good as his word, however. The two quaint figures clad in rusty black, voluble and breathless with the enormity of this adventure, were bundled into a third-class carriage. The registrar handed the elder woman a sheet of directions, and, being a kindly-hearted man, he pressed five shillings into the palm

of Maggie Ann's black-cotton-gloved hand. Then he spoke magnificently to the guard—as one brass-bound official to another—and with a wide gesture of farewell that was partly a military salute and partly a parochial benediction he turned on his heel.

The train slowly gathered speed, and the two women sat staring out of the window as if they were hypnotised. Then Maggie Ann opened her clenched palm and displayed the two half-crowns which she held together with the tickets.

“Did 'e give 'em to you?”

“Aye,” said Maggie Ann.

“Well, well! Who'd ha' thought it?” said her mother. “Put 'em somewhere safe, Maggie Ann, for fear of robbers.” They had the carriage to themselves, and Maggie Ann obeyed her mother accordingly.

Then whispering together in the vernacular, after the manner of the Welsh, crying a little from time to time to keep one another company, and sustained throughout the long journey by peppermint drops of amazing pungency, they were whirled out of the land of their fathers into the unknown.

Among the passengers who shared their carriage later on was a dignified, elderly lady, with silver-white hair and a face of a singular, though rather sad, sweetness of expression. She was dressed in deep black, and listened intently as the old woman told her story for the benefit of their fellow passengers. She did not smile, as did the others, when

222 An Awfully Big Adventure

Maggie Ann of the reddened eyes and nose, with wisps of untidy hair protruding from under her married sister's hat, was bidden to display the tickets in token of an Empire's solicitude for the women of the humblest of her sons.

"You are lucky," she said gently. "You can at least bury your dead. That was denied me. I lost my first-born in that battle too. He was a sailor like your son was."

They reached Paddington as the dusk was falling, and in the vast echoing dimness of the station the immensity of the unknown descended upon the two Welsh women, as they stood bewildered upon the platform among the jostling throng of passengers.

"Find a policeman, Maggie Ann," said the elder woman, consulting the sheet of directions given her by the registrar. "An' ask 'im where to find a tidy li'l' public-'ouse where we can stop the night."

But before Maggie Ann could invoke the aid of the law in quest of lodgings, the grey-haired lady who had spoken to them in the train again approached the pair.

"My car is waiting," she said. "Will you both come home with me for the night? I have a big house and a very empty one; there is room for you both. Cook will give you breakfast early, and you can start for the East Coast to-morrow morning in good time for the funeral."

"Well, indeed to goodness!" said Mrs. Jones, and suffered herself to be led to a waiting car in which,

to the visible astonishment of an elderly chauffeur, she and Maggie Ann were placed. "There's kind you are, Mum."

"Not at all," said the grey-haired lady as the car started. "I have very few servants now, and there are plenty of spare servants' rooms. I am grateful to Providence for bringing us together into the same railway carriage," she continued simply. "I—I am so glad to be able to help"—her hands twisted together on her lap with a little nervous, rather pathetic gesture—"another mother."

The visitors supped in a vast spotless servants' hall, where the floor was of polished linoleum in black and white squares, and the electric light shone down on burnished copper pans and scoured woodwork.

Cook, a stout sentimentalist, afterwards bade the old woman draw a chair to the fire and together they brewed strong tea.

"I've buried two husbands," she said, "but never a bairn have I borne. I don't know but what you're to be envied, Mrs. Jones. Her ladyship, she gave her only son, same's what you did, and her heart is broken. But she holds her head the prouder. 'There's worse things than dyin' for the right,' she sez." Cook dabbed at her eyes with a huge pocket-handkerchief.

Janet, the trim housemaid, was interested in the Navy for personal reasons in which a good-looking signalman "on Jellicoe's boat" played a considerable part. She it was, early the following morning, who

224 An Awfully Big Adventure

took Maggie Ann in hand. "Did you ever see such hair wasted?" she said, contemplating Maggie Ann's honey-coloured tangled thatch. "Even if you are going to your brother's funeral . . ." and bade her comb it, and dressed it with such cunning that the pale slatternly girl stood silent, staring before the mirror. The generous enthusiasm of the woman who is fond of her sex seized Janet. "Here," she said. "Put this blouse on; it's one her ladyship gave me. I don't want it. And see if these boots will fit you. . . . Oh! what stockings—wait a minute." Drawers were rummaged, bits of lace and crape unearthed, the married sister's hat was pounced upon and underwent a swift metamorphosis in Janet's nimble fingers. "There!" she said at length. "Why, I believe you're pretty!" Maggie Ann turned from the glass with her hazel eyes aglow, and a faint colour creeping towards the cheek bones set wide apart in her pale face.

2

Towards dawn a British Destroyer limped into the little harbour embraced by one flank of the headland where the coastguard station stood.

One of the blades of the Destroyer's propeller was missing, and the "A" bracket, designed to support the shaft, threatened to decline any further responsibility in the matter.

The Destroyer had sighted an enemy submarine on the surface at close quarters during the night. The submarine had dived with commendable promptitude, but not quite fast enough to avoid the nimbly manœuvred Destroyer, who grated over her outer skin at thirty knots. The conning tower of the submarine, which bumped along the length of the Destroyer's side, was responsible for the disinclination of the "A" bracket for anything but a merely passive attitude towards the damaged propeller.

A couple of depth charges accelerated the submersion of the submarine considerably, and the Destroyer made for the nearest harbour with leaking stern-glands, and a ship's company uplifted beyond mere jubilation.

The Commanding Officer went ashore to telegraph his report of the incident, while the Chief Artificer Engineer and the Blacksmith put their heads together over the fractured "A" bracket.

Ashore, the Lieutenant-Commander encountered the Chief Officer of the Coastguard.

"Seein' as 'ow you're in the harbour, sir," said the Chief Officer, "mebbe you'd like to land a party for the funeral this afternoon."

His tone was that of a man organising an entertainment under difficulties. "This 'ere's a dull 'ole, an' a bit of a show would liven 'em up like."

The Lieutenant, standing on the steps of the telegraph office, looked up the sleepy street.

"Whose funeral?" he inquired.

226 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Party o' the name o' Jones," replied the C.O. in tones of melancholy enjoyment. "Trimmer, Royal Naval Reserve, washed ashore near the coastguard station. Mother attendin' funeral at 2 P.M. If you was to land a firin' party, an' a bugler, an' mebbe half a dozen mourners, sir, we could do the thing in style."

The Lieutenant mused in silence for a while. The "A" bracket would take till five o'clock, and the funeral was at 2 P.M. "I can't guarantee the mourners," he said, "but you can have the firing party and the bugler. And if any of the men wish to attend as mourners, I'll give them leave."

"Thank you, sir," said the Chief Officer. "The Boy Scouts from 'ere is turning out, and the firemen from Nordbury, an' the lifeboat's crew. *They* was all for 'avin' a collection afterwards in aid of the institootion. But I sez to them——"

The Lieutenant-Commander had sighted a pink parasol, shading a white muslin dress above neat ankles, that emerged from a shop farther down the street. If he walked quickly enough he ought to be able to get a glimpse of the face hidden by the parasol by the time he reached the pier, where his gig was waiting. Two years of war in a Destroyer quickens masculine interest in such problems. He descended the steps hurriedly. "That'll be all right," he said. "The party'll be at the landing-place at one-thirty," and hastened down the street in the wake of the pink parasol.

Twenty minutes later he was climbing on board his Destroyer.

"Mr. Foulkes," he said to the Gunner, "I want you to take a firing party of eight men and a bugler, to attend the funeral of an R.N.R. trimmer who's being buried ashore this afternoon at 2 P.M. Better run them through the manual before they land. And if any of the port watch want to attend as mourners they can have leave. Some of the stokers may like to go."

The Torpedo Coxswain who had overheard the conversation went forward to herald the tidings along the Mess deck. "Blime!" said a bearded seaman ecstatically, when he heard the intelligence, "first we sinks a perishin' submarine, an' then strike me giddy if the bloke don't lush us up to a funeral ashore! I reckon that's actin' proper 'andsome."

At 1 P.M. the funeral party fell in on the upper deck; the brown-gaitered firing party, with rifles and bandoliers, and an attendant bugler, were given final injunctions by the Gunner.

"Don't forget now, when we arrives at the mortuary, dead-'ouse or what-not, the firing party will rest on their arms reversed, the muzzle of the rifle placed on the toe of the right boot, 'ands resting on the butt, chins sunk upon the breast, at the same time assumin' an aspec' cheerful but subdued."

The Lieutenant-Commander arrived on deck and interrupted the oration.

"What's that brigade fallen in forward there, Mr.

228 An Awfully Big Adventure

Foulkes?" he inquired. "We aren't giving general leave."

"Them's the mourners, sir," said the Gunner, sternly surveying the crape-swathed ranks, who, after the fashion of sailors when about to go ashore, were preening themselves and squaring off each other's blue-jean collars.

"Mourners, 'shun!"

The mourners sprang to attention and gazed solemnly into vacancy.

"How many of the port watch are landing, in the name of mercy?" asked the Commanding Officer.

"The 'ole lot, sir," said the Gunner, "bein' wishful to pay respec' to the dead."

The third volley rang out across the quiet churchyard that was the last resting-place of R.N.R. (T.) 1347.

The bolts of the rifles rattled and snapped as the firing party unloaded; the last empty cartridge case fell to the ground with a little tinkling sound, and the bugler raised his bugle to send the thin sweet notes of "The Last Post" out into the stillness of the afternoon, speeding the fighting soul upon its final journey.

Its last unfinished note died away, and there was a moment's utter silence. A hoarse word of command, followed by the grounding of rifle-butts, succeeded the stillness, and the firing party swung off down the hill

with the air of men who had handled a dramatic situation without discredit.

The mourners, at the invitation of the Chief Officer of the Coastguard—who held that a thing worth doing at all was worth doing properly—repaired to the Coastguard Station to partake of a cup of tea.

Here as many as could crowd into the little house were introduced; in a congenial atmosphere of tears, hot tea and peppermint, to the mother and sister of R.N.R. (T.) 1347.

"Dear, dear," said Mrs. Jones in a gratified aside to Maggie Ann, "to think Albert Edward had so many friends! There's fine young fellows too."

The mourners, not one of whom had ever set eyes on Albert Edward in their lives, acted to this cue with the inevitable instinct of the sailor for the rôle required of him.

When, reluctantly, they departed, shepherded back to the boat by the Torpedo Coxswain, Maggie Ann stood at the little gate leading to the cabbage patch, and gazed after them with swimming eyes.

"There's kind they are," she murmured, "grand, strong men an' all . . ." and thrust a crumpled twist of paper one had given her, bearing his name and address, into the bosom of her dress.

A week later the Commanding Officer of the Destroyer, in the exercise of his duties as censor of the ship's company's letters, came across the following epistle :

230 An Awfully Big Adventure

"DEAR MISS JONES,—Hoping this finds you as it leaves me in the pink, thank God. I take up my pen to write you these few lines dear Miss Jones, it gives me much pleasure to write to you as promised after your brother's funeral which I hope you will find time to write me a few lines as I am a very lonely sailor. Being an norfun and no incumbrances whatsoever dear Miss Jones I now draw to a close with best respects and please write soon.

"from your sincere friend,

"JOE WALSH, able seaman.

"P.S.—I enclose postle order for £1 so please don't be offended, excuse me, hoping you will buy some little present for yourself."

The Lieutenant-Commander restored the document to its envelope. "Thank God I was taught young to accept responsibility," he said. He picked up the censor stamp, pressed it fervently on the envelope, and sent the letter on its way.

VIII

THE EPITAPH

(1919)

IT stood in the darkest corner of a West End antique furniture dealer's shop.

"That?" The proprietor echoed my inquiry.

"Yes, it's one of the desks out of the old *Britannia*. Came out of the studies where the cadets were given instruction on board. I acquired it when the ship was broken up." He eyed me thoughtfully through his spectacles, and passed three fingers round thin, clean-shaven lips. "Valueless intrinsically, of course. But it struck me it might have sentimental associations for some: possibly historic associations in years to come. Generations of cadets have carved and scratched their names all over it. This was one of the few remaining. Nearly all the others had been broken up for firewood—it's only deal."

Together we dragged the relic into the light of day. "You see?" he said, and switched a duster over the varnished sloping surface. One glance sufficed.

"Yes," I replied, "I see. . . . I'll take the desk. I'll take it now if you can get me a taxi."

232 An Awfully Big Adventure

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank *you*," said I.

* * * * *

The fashionable epidemic prevailing at the time was mumps. The stricken and the suspect were herded in separate enclosures between decks, segregated by canvas screens hung from the beams overhead to the deck. The migratory mump germs probably found the canvas screens less of an obstacle to freedom than their victims, and to these, doomed to the confines of a hammock, the time passed with leaden slowness. Even the novelty of contemplating in a mirror the unfamiliar distortion of one's jowl palled after a bit. "Dracula," a much-thumbed and germ-impregnated volume, circulated from hammock to hammock until even Bram Stoker's vampires failed to stir the pulse. Meals, reduced to proportions in themselves an insult, did little to break the monotony, and the hour arrived when Satan, on the look-out for idle hands, must have found his task what a later generation would have called a "cinch."

It was the custom, when visitations of this nature descended upon the cadets, for a sick-berth steward to be banished into exile with the stricken. The job can have been no sinecure, although germs ignored the individual in question with as great indifference as bees display towards an apiarist. Frequent sojourns in the camps of the afflicted had soured the temper of this sick-berth steward and warped a nature that can at no time have been a sunny one. As a

ministering angel his appearance was not æsthetic; he was a ponderous fellow, with a neck that ran to creases at the back and appeared to undulate imperceptibly into his bullet head. In fact, it was difficult to say where neck ended and head began. His eyes were small and furtive; his nose a button; Nature, in a well-meaning attempt to balance matters, had given him enormous ears set at right angles to his head. It was this peculiarity that earned him the title of "Windsails," a name by which he was universally known among the cadets, and to which, curiously enough, he answered without resentment.

Now, it happened that one of the victims of the mump scourge was a certain cadet whom, for purposes of this reminiscence, we will call Day. As events transpired, he was not long destined to wear the King's uniform, but passed a few years afterwards to a walk of life whose ethics obeyed a less trammelled code than that of the Royal Navy.

In worldly knowledge, ingenuity of mind, and humour of a certain standard, he was far in advance of his years. Possessed of a cold-blooded courage, utterly indifferent to consequences, he was an unfaltering ringleader in a "rux." In fact, it was this last quality that made for such popularity as he commanded. No one really liked him, but there were a good many who held him in half-grudging admiration, and so passed under an influence not wholly to the good, but dominated by his personality and controlled by a glib and bitter tongue.

234 An Awfully Big Adventure

Boredom hit him harder than the more placid temperaments; they might be provoked to mischief thereby, but in the soul of Day it roused a very devil of perversity. Finally, one evening when the slender evidences of the last meal had been removed, and life became a blank without outlook or hope, Day broached his scheme to half a dozen of his languid fellow-patients who lounged round the open gun-port watching the afterglow dying in the western sky.

"I vote we cut Windsails down when he's snoring in his hammock to-night," he said in his slow, meditative drawl. Windsails slept at night in a hammock slung a little forward of his charges, and the sound of his snoring compared favourably with what one can imagine of the roaring of the Bulls of Bashan.

There was an aghast silence. The very tone in which Day propounded such a stupendous outrage was sufficient in itself to compel their admiration.

"I can reach the foot of his hammock lanyard where it's made fast to the beam, from my hammock," he went on, with a thoughtful smile on his thin lips. "I can reach it with my razor." It was in keeping with other characteristics that he should possess a razor, although the need for it was not apparent on his smooth cheeks.

"We shall all be run in," objected a faint-heart, "Heaven only knows what we'd get for cutting down a sick-berth steward. A 'bimming,' as likely as not." Perhaps some dim shadow of the Hague Convention floated through the speaker's mind.

Day eyed him contemptuously. "Why should anyone be run in? He'd never suspect. They'd think his lanyard broke 'cos it was rotten. Windsails weighs about a ton."

"But suppose they ask us point-blank if we know anything about it?"

"Why, then we should have to tell a lie—a thundering big one—and stick to it." He mused with his agate-coloured eyes on the far-off hills turning dark against the quiet sky. "'Course, you fellows *needn't* know anything about it. You can shut your eyes when you hear Windsails start snoring, and keep 'em shut. Then you couldn't actually swear who did it." His smile was, somehow, never quite boyish. "D'you see?"

Something like relief spread over the faces of the conspirators. Assuredly this was a master-mind.

"It 'ud have to be done in a wily way," said one, revolving the possibilities of the coup with reviving courage. Given this loophole for the conscience the monstrous proposal assumed an alluring aspect. "Make the lanyard look sort of frayed. . . . Windsails told me there weren't any letters for me yesterday," he added inconsequently, "and there were two. He was just too jolly lazy to get 'em."

"He found my cigarettes where I'd hidden 'em—in my boots," supplemented another, "and collared 'em. Said I could either give 'em to him or be run in." He brooded darkly. "Serve him jolly well

236 An Awfully Big Adventure

right!" For the moment he almost persuaded himself that the affair was in the nature of a punitive reprisal.

"It's just possible, though," temporised a more law-abiding member, "that if no one owns up they'll punish everybody—I mean everybody who's under the screen now."

"Ah!" observed Day, "in that case something would have to be done about it."

The evening wore on, and the invalids retired to their hammocks. Windsails, having concluded the few simple preliminaries to which he was accustomed, turned into his.

"Fuggy beast!" whispered one of the watchful partners of this unholy alliance. "He doesn't even take his socks off!"

One by one the law-abiding occupants of the hammocks dropped off to sleep; but, as the sound of their even breathing swelled and the minutes passed, the wakefulness of the conspirators increased. Would Windsails ever start snoring? What was Day doing? Did it hurt much to be cut down? Supposing he died . . . broke his neck?

Then, faint at first, gathering volume and strength every moment, began the rumbling, stertorous eruption of sound that proclaimed the reception of Windsails into the arms of Morpheus.

If he died, would it be murder? . . . Accessories before the fact. . . . Of course, as long as one kept one's eyes tightly shut. . . . What was Day doing?

Why didn't he get it over? Keeping everyone on tenterhooks——

There was a soft, almost noiseless chuckle. That was Day. Of course the situation would appeal to him; he knew no one dared open his eyes.

Crash! Then utter silence.

Ten throbbing seconds passed—twenty. Still no sound. He must be dead!—no need to pretend any longer. Half a dozen heads emerged from blankets—craned; jaws dropped, hearts beat suffocatingly. But the huddled figure on the deck made no movement; it remained in the light of the police-lantern a confused heap of blankets and muffled humanity that presently emitted a groan—and then another.

No one dared move; blanched faces stared down over the edges of the canvas hammocks; visions of disgrace, expulsion—worse, the felon's dock and hangman's noose, came clustering out of the shadows.

And then Day snored.

It was not a loud snore; nothing overdone or in-artistic. Just the heavy, regular breathing of an innocent and tired boy asleep. That fellow had nerves of steel! Endurance, pent in frailer vessels, had just reached its limits when the huddled figure on the deck stirred, rolled out of its blankets, and, with another groan, rose to his feet. Day's solitary breathing became a chorus of snores, impassioned in their realism.

238 An Awfully Big Adventure

Windsails stood motionless, contemplating a massive bollard adjoining the ruins of his bed.

"*That's* what winded me," he said with the air of one who had solved a problem of some complexity. He must have come in contact with it as he fell. Then, slowly and deliberately he bent down, picked up the severed hammock lanyard and scrutinised it in the lantern light. In silence he made the end fast to the beam again, readjusted his blankets, and climbed ponderously into the hammock.

"Snore away!" he observed with vicious calm. "But there's some of you as will answer for this!"

There was in the captain's face that blend of sternness and faint surprise with which he always confronted malefactors. In this case there were arraigned before him all the recent inmates of the quarantine quarters.

"It is incredible to me," he was saying, "that any officer—any young gentleman about to become a naval officer—should so far forget himself as to perpetrate this outrage. I have personally examined the hammock lanyard, and there is no doubt in my mind whatever that it was cut—cut by a sharp knife. There was no one under the screen at the time with the exception of you young gentlemen." He paused and allowed his grave, handsome eyes to travel over their haggard faces. "I expect the cadet who did it to step forward and own up honourably."

No one moved. There was a pause. "I shall

give you all three minutes to think it over," continued the captain, "and if at the end of that time no one has come forward, the whole lot will do instruction on board every half-holiday for the rest of the term." The captain drew out a gold watch, glanced at it, and closed it with a little snap. As if dismissing the whole business from his mind, he turned and began conversing with the commander in inaudible undertones. Finally, he drew forth the watch again and turned towards the cadets.

"You have fifteen seconds . . ." he said, paused, and closed the watch for the last time. Turning towards the commander, he nodded. "Dismiss the cadets."

On the desk in front of each cadet was a litter of foolscap covered with ladders of bewildering calculations whereby seamen, incredibly enough, ascertained the position of their ships at noon.

It was a laborious task, exacting and uninteresting during legitimate school hours; as an occupation for a half-holiday in June, with the warm air blowing through the open ports the scent of hay and Devon moorland, it was loathsome. One of the toilers, having finally placed his ship securely in the centre of Radnorshire, laid down his pen, thrust his thumbs into his "beckets" and gave himself up to vengeful brooding. The breeze brought visions of the playing fields and practice at the nets, with a lemon-squash

240 An Awfully Big Adventure

to follow . . . and a strawberry ice. . . . Oh, curse Day! Why couldn't he own up and take his hiding like a man? What was the use of his declaring that the lanyard really broke of its own accord? That he never touched it! As if anybody believed him after all he said the evening before it happened.

He glanced across the study with furtive dislike at the author of all this misery. It was hard to believe that he had really done it to look at him now. Day had finished his task (he was extraordinarily quick at figures) and was leaning back in his seat with his lips pursed up in a soundless whistle, staring at the flies on the ceiling with a sort of far-away smile in his eyes. Of course he had done it! Didn't the captain as good as say he'd done it? He was doubtless planning some fresh devilment.

His dislike of Day crystallised to hatred. He had rather admired him before all this took place; admired his cool impudence, his quick tongue, his superlative cleverness at games. Now he hated him, and wanted to do something that would proclaim his feelings to the Universe. . . . Perpetuate— An idea smote him and his face brightened.

With the aid of a book of logarithmic tables and an instrument box he built up a not too obvious barricade screening him from casual observation. Then, drawing a knife from his pocket, he cleared a little space on his desk and set to work, whittling unobtrusively. In a quarter of an hour it was done,

and with ink and spittle the newly-cut wood anointed to a semblance of age. Feeling better, he resumed his navigation.

* * * * *

The daylight had gone from the outside world and there was only firelight in the room. The little desk I had bought earlier in the day still stood in the corner where I had deposited it, and as I lay half-dozing in the saddlebag chair, the mocking flames played strange tricks. It seemed as if another figure were in the room—a restless, uneasy shadow among the shadows, and ever and again it seemed to hover round the desk. I lay with my eyes half closed, identifying one by one the familiar objects of the room, and gradually the presence of this shadow puzzled me to wakefulness. The poker, left carelessly between the bars of the grate, dropped a few inches, and the handle struck the fender with a little rattle. The fire spluttered and flared brightly, so that I saw the figure by the desk distinctly. It was a tall, gaunt man in a uniform I didn't recognise for the moment—a ragged, mud-stained jacket and baggy trousers. Then I remembered seeing a regiment of them on the march once near Algiers. It was the uniform of the Foreign Legion.

The figure was bending over the desk tracing something on it with a lean forefinger.

I sat upright, and as I moved the tall man turned his face towards me. There was a grimy stained bandage round his head, and it was twenty years

242 An Awfully Big Adventure

since I had seen him, but I recognised the queer pale eyes and thin lips.

"Day!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said. It gave me an inexplicable shiver down the back to hear him speak. "But I didn't do it. I didn't cut Windsails down." He fingered the surface of the desk like a lost soul feeling for the latch of Heaven's gate.

"I meant to do it," he went on, "and I had my razor ready. I was going to keep you all in suspense for a bit. And then, suddenly, before I touched it, the lanyard broke. I think Windsails cut off the frayed ends afterwards. He hated us all."

There was a dark stain on the left breast of Day's jacket that seemed to be spreading slowly.

"I came back to tell you," he said, his voice sounding faint and far away. "I don't care what the others think. But this——" Again he fingered the desk.

Within reach of my hand was an electric desk lamp, one of those portable things with a switch at the base. I reached out and turned it on, flooding the room with light.

The desk was there all right, but I was alone.

Carrying the lamp in my hand, I rose and crossed over to examine my purchase again. Yes, there were the words, crossed and recrossed by faintly scratched names and dates, covered by successive layers of

varnish, but still plain to read, deep carven in the wood :

DAY IS A SCAB

The room was half full of smoke when I had finished, and the acrid smell of burning presently brought an alarmed housemaid to the threshold.

"It's nothing," I reassured her. "I was only doing a little poker-work on this desk." I replaced the fireiron in the fender, and opened the window to let the smoke out as the maid withdrew.

An uneasy wind was fretting the invisible rhododendrons with the threat of rain on the morrow.

"I'm sorry, Day," I said to the darkened universe. "But it's all right now. I've burnt it out."

IX

THE ENGLISH WAY

(1917)

I

THE Quartermaster of the Watch pushed aside the tarpaulin cover to the Wardroom hatchway and whistled softly through his teeth. "Mail," he said to the Officers' Steward, who stepped out of the diminutive pantry in answer to the summons, and, bending down, thrust a bundle of sodden envelopes into the outstretched hand. It was snowing hard, and the whaler that brought off the Destroyer's Christmas mail had shipped sufficient water to call for a muttered protest from beneath the sou'-wester of the stroke oar.

"I don' mind wettin' my blinking shirt," he muttered, as he tugged at the oar, "not so long as we brings 'ope 'an' comfort. But if them perishin' mail-bags is goin' to sit in a pool o' water—what the 'ell's the use? No one can't read a letter wot's bin soaked in the Norf Sea for a hour!" The whaler's crew murmured concurrence.

The Coxswain, nursing the mail-bags on his knee with a hand on each and his elbow on the tiller, bade the crew chuck their weight into their oars and mind

their ensanguined business—what time he, the Coxswain, would mind his. This admirably 'adjusted division of labour brought them eventually alongside, and the mail inboard.

The Surgeon Probationer, whose body was buried in the depths of a wicker arm-chair (with the exception of his feet, which were on top of the stove; and his heart, which was in the keeping of the "Wren" driver of an Admiralty car), heard the whaler come alongside and was at the bottom of the hatchway as soon as the steward.

"Gimme the ruddy things," he muttered, hungrily, 'and awoke the partially gassed inmates of the Wardroom with a joyous whoop.

"Mail!" he shouted, and dealt the moist envelopes into the laps of the recumbent figures sleeping off the effects of a Christmas luncheon in various attitudes of statuesque abandon.

The Mess awoke ble'ary-eyed, and fumbled with its correspondence. One by one the forms sat upright; grunts were succeeded by articulate expressions of approval. The Lieutenant (E), who sat nearest the bell, rose to his feet and pressed it fervently. Then he sat down again, ordered 'a drink, and slit open the first of four fat envelopes. It was from a favourite sister, ætat fourteen, who, having made up her feminine mind that Sir David Beatty's position in the naval cosmos was one that her brother would fill with more picturesque and efficient completeness,

246 An Awfully Big Adventure

speedily surrounded that officer in a comfortable aura of giggling self-complacency.

The Midshipman R.N.R. burst open a bulging envelope and stepped straightway on to a magic carpet, which wafted him out of the steel shell of a Destroyer's Wardroom into a Berkshire vicarage.

The Sub sat on the settee with his legs in heavy leather sea-boots and his elbows on his knees reading a letter from a farm in Northamptonshire. The writer of the letter had spent the morning cleaning out a byre, and the early part of the afternoon sorting potatoes. She had then bathed and sat down in her prettiest crêpe-de-Chine kimono and a mingled fragrance of China tea and bath salts to the composition of a letter that spread a slowly widening grin of ecstasy across the weather-beaten features of the recipient, who had almost forgotten what a woman's voice sounded like.

The clouds of tobacco-smoke curled to and fro in the close atmosphere of the Destroyer's Wardroom, and the silence—save for the rustle of a quickly-turned page or the snicker of a knife opening a fresh envelope—was profound. Then the Surgeon Probationer chuckled hoarsely. It was a profane sound and passed unnoticed; but presently he bent forward and thrust a gaudy strip of pasteboard beneath the nose of the enraptured Sub-Lieutenant.

"Call *that* nuffin'?" he queried, coarsely.

The Sub detached his soul with difficulty from the seventh heaven, and considered a highly-

coloured representation of a robin upon a snowy background, and the legend "Peace on earth and goodwill 'among men" picked out in frosted letters against a border of holly leaves.

"'Snice, ain't it?" said the Surgeon Probationer.

"Fair bit of all-right," said the Sub, good-humouredly, and resumed page seven of the closely scribbled sheet:

"I am writing this by the firelight, and if only you were here we'd draw up our chairs close and p'r'aps——"

"My Aunt Agatha sent it to me," continued the voice of the importunist. "Read what's written on the back."

The Sub, who was what is called a good mess-mate, turned the pasteboard over rather absent-mindedly.

"Love your enemies," was written in angular spidery handwriting across the inoffensive surface of the card. The Sub was twenty, but he had known four years of warfare against the Powers of Evil, which we call Germany for short.

"Any relation of Lansdowne or Ramsay Macdonald, your Aunt Agatha?" he inquired, and tossed the card back, to return instantly to a firelit twilight and "p'r'aps."

The Surgeon looked round the Mess in search of a fresh confidant. The First Lieutenant sat hunched up on his right, holding a bunch of sheets of paper

248 An Awfully Big Adventure

clenched in his hand, and staring at the stove with unseeing eyes.

"Here, Number One," said Aunt Agatha's nephew, and smote his neighbour on the knee. "You look as if you wanted brightening up. Read *that*, my lad! Both sides. Every picture tells a story."

The Lieutenant turned eyes like those of a startled horse upon the speaker.

"Eh?" he said. He, too, had come back a long way to answer a living voice.

"Read that, my pippin."

The Lieutenant read obediently, turning the card backwards and forwards in his fingers as if looking for something that wasn't there. The crumpled sheets of his letter dropped to the deck and lay unheeded.

Then abruptly he laughed; it was not a laugh common to Englishmen, and so disconcerting was the sound that two or three faces lifted from the pre-occupation of letter or illustrated paper, and tranquil eyes stared curiously.

"My God!" said the First Lieutenant. "That's the best joke—the best joke——" His voice dropped low. He handed back the Christmas-card and fumbled blindly for the fallen sheets of his letter. One by one he straightened them on his knees, smoothing out the creases mechanically.

"The best joke——" He rose to his feet with

something in his white face that jerked the medical man instantly upright beside him.

"Sit down," said the First Lieutenant, and there was a note in his voice the Doctor obeyed, because it was something he was still young enough to acknowledge. "Listen," said the Lieutenant, in hard, dry tones. "You've got to share this—you've all got to share this." Papers rustled and every eye was on the speaker. "It's—it's too good to keep to oneself. My brother"—he made a little gesture with the letter in his hand—"my brother was wounded—broken thigh—twenty miles behind the line in a base hospital—the Huns bombed it in broad daylight, with the Red Cross flying on every flagstaff and painted on every roof—bombed it in cold blood, and killed thirty-four wounded officers and men and two V.A.D.'s. They killed my brother, and they killed ——" He thrust the letter into the limp hands of the Surgeon Probationer. "You gave me something to read just now. Read that! They killed the whitest woman—she was trying to save him—with the Red Cross on her breast—and his thigh broken. Goodwill among men! Love your enemies! Love your——"

The Gunner came across the mess with his heavy tread, his stolid face full of concern.

"No offence, *I'm* sure, sir," he said, glancing at the Surgeon. "Mr. Dantham didn't know—how *could* he? Nor yet his aunt——"

The tragedy of one is the tragedy of all in a com-

250 An Awfully Big Adventure

munity as small and as intimate as a Destroyer Wardroom; but the innate sense of justice in the Briton's heart found expression in the Gunner's inarticulate sympathy. He held no brief for the Hun, but he was the champion of the shocked Surgeon and Aunt Agatha for all her pacifist leanings.

The Surgeon sat with the unread letter in his hands staring up at the First Lieutenant.

"Oh!" he said. "Oh, the swine." A growl of confirmation ran round the Mess, but no one addressed the First Lieutenant direct.

"Yes," he said. "Bestial swine. Brutal, bestial swine. If he'd been killed by the shell that broke his leg I wouldn't have minded. That would have been fair fight; and she—if it had been septic poisoning or disease; those are the risks all nurses run: the enemies they face and fight all day and night. But *this!*" He spoke in low, measured tones. "If I ever get to grips with a Hun after this——" The mask of icy self-control slipped for a moment from his face. His features worked and his hands made a movement somehow suggestive and brutal.

"Best have a drink," said the Gunner, soothingly, and as he spoke there was a trampling of men's feet overhead, muffled by the snow on the thin plating. The Quartermaster's pipe rippled and shrilled, to be succeeded by a hoarse sing-song bellow. "Boot and saddle" sounded in a cavalry barracks never stirred the stables as that rush of unseen feet overhead, breaking the peace of a Christmas afternoon in

harbour, galvanised the Wardroom into sudden activity.

"Stand by to slip from the buoy," said the Gunner, and made for the hatchway. But the First Lieutenant was before him, bareheaded, cramming his Christmas mail into his pocket as he swung himself up the iron rungs of the ladder.

2

The Commander, who had been standing peering through his glasses for the last five minutes, lowered them suddenly and glanced at the chart clamped on the bracket beside him.

His First Lieutenant continued to stare across the grey sea to the north-west. Day was dawning, and the spray, flung from the reeling bows of the Destroyer, was like a frozen whip-lash on their faces. "Yes, that's them," he said, in a grimly ungrammatical undertone. To the naked eye nothing was visible above the ragged skyline, but every man on the bridge was standing gazing intently in the same direction, as if the wind carried with it the scent of the quarry they sought.

The Commander gave an order to the Signaller standing attentive beside the daylight searchlight, and immediately the shutters broke into a chattering "View halloa!"

252 An Awfully Big Adventure

A blink answered on the instant, where, two cables astern, the second boat in the line followed in the heaving wake. Out of the faint haze of smoke that almost screened the rest of the division from view, one after the other the answers flickered, and then the leader spoke. The lights all blinked back together.

"Signal passed, sir!" said the Yeoman.

"Right," replied the Commander. He bent over the chart again for an instant, and straightening, gave an order to the wheel.

The leader's bows leaped at a charging sea, rose shuddering, and fell away from the wind a couple of points; the drone of the turbines below took on a different, higher note. The Commander turned and glanced along the upper deck with a little grim smile above the turns of his worsted muffler. The Destroyer was stripped for the fight, and at the mid-ship and after guns the crews were blowing on their hands and jesting amongst themselves. The Gunner sat astride the torpedo tube glancing along the sights as the twin tubes trained slowly round like ponderous accusing fingers.

"Your brother ain't going to be long unavenged," said the Commander to his First Lieutenant, as the latter climbed into the fire-control position. "We've caught this party cold!"

The First Lieutenant nodded, unsmiling, as he turned away.

"We'll sink the lot," he said. "But that's too

good a death for a Hun. The sea's too clean to drown 'em in. I'd——" He checked the sentence and busied himself about his fire-control instruments.

Then out of the north-west came a stutter of light. It winked suspiciously, and the Commander laughed, with his hand on the fire-gong key.

"*There's* my answer, Fritz," he said, and before the words were out of his mouth the foremost gun opened fire. "You're dev'lish good at raiding merchant convoys—let's see how you take a hiding." The acrid cordite smoke, as his guns gave reply to the German challenge, caught him in the throat, and his words ended in a cough.

The German Destroyers turned for home, held their course for eight bitter minutes, steaming hell-for-leather and husbanding their ammunition. Their instructions were peculiar, inasmuch as they were ordered to return at all costs to their base. In destroyer warfare the nation that holds command of the seas can afford to omit this bitter clause from its light-craft's sailing orders; but an Admiralty that knows it can send nothing to the succour of its disabled adventurers perforce plays for safety.

The German flotilla leader, bending over his chart and stop-watch, deluged with spray from falling projectiles, made a rapid mental calculation and realised that this was no tip-and-run business. He had played that game twice and brought it off, and played it once too often. In golfing parlance, of which he was entirely ignorant, he was stymied.

254 An Awfully Big Adventure

He laid a smoke-screen, and turned under cover of it, avoided a long-distance torpedo by six feet, and applied himself to the voice-pipe connecting him with the engine-room. What he said to the blond perspiring engineer at the other end does not concern this story, because a "browning" salvo at four miles' range struck his quivering fugitive command amidships, and beat her into a flaming, smoking welter of flying fragments and spouting foam.

His opponent saw things appearing above the smear of that hasty smoke-screen, things that leaped into view against the grey sky and descended again into invisibility. He lowered his glasses, glanced grinning at his First Lieutenant, and gave another order to the Quartermaster at the wheel.

But the Quartermaster was seized with a sudden preoccupation. He was leaning back against a stanchion with the broken spokes of the wheel still in his hands, looking with stupefied amazement at the pulsating jet squirting from his thigh.

"Hand steering-gear!" bawled the Commander, striving to dominate the din of the action with a mechanical shout. He jumped the body of the Yeoman of Signals, sprawled bloodily across the head of the ladder, and stumbled blindly down the iron rungs.

"Give 'em hell, Number One!" he shouted, and caught a glimpse of his Second-in-Command's head and shoulders above the rent and tattered splinter-mats. "The blighters have got our range," he mut-

tered, and as he reached the upper deck he saw another torpedo hurtle from the tube and vanish in a cloud of spray.

"Keep it going, boys!" he shouted, as he passed the midship gun. "Give it to 'em hot and strong!"

The gun-layer turned from the eye-piece as he passed and grinned as the smoking breech clanged open. His jumper and jersey were rent from shoulder to hip, and he stanchd a wound with cotton-waste while the loader slammed a fresh cartridge home. The Destroyer, temporarily out of control, fell broadside on to the sea; the waves leaped at them and sluiced knee-deep across the deck ere the Commander reached the after steering position and got the kicking hand-wheel manned. The wind carried the sound of cheering to the Commander's ears, and he glanced over his shoulder to see the rest of the division wheel and go crashing past his quarter in a cloud of spray and funnel smoke. The next astern had taken charge as the leader fell out of line. A burst of shrapnel whipped the after funnel into a colander, and the Gunner rolled into the scuppers, clutching helplessly at a cleat, and slid into the embrace of a curling sea that folded its arms about him and carried him from sight.

The Lieutenant (E) appeared on deck and clawed his way aft through clouds of steam.

"Main steam-pipe, port engine-room's cut, sir," he shouted. "Nine knots is the best we'll get out of her." He stared ruefully to leeward.

256 An Awfully Big Adventure

The fight had swept away to the south, and the crippled leader followed, to pass presently across the battle's trail. Clinging to lifebuoys and scraps of German wreckage were pitiful drenched human beings. Hands waved, white faces appeared in the smooth flanks of the waves or vanished, smothered in their breaking crests.

The Commander jerked the telegraphs and surveyed his rolling deck. "Cease fire!" he bawled, satisfied himself that the battered whaler was still seaworthy, and gave the order, "Away lifeboat's crew!"

They lowered her, manned by men still breathless with the exultant flush of battle, some with hasty bandages about them, and to and fro they plied amid that tumbling sea and the unmanned foe calling for dear life at their rough hands. The Destroyer turned to make a lee, and along her rail the ship's company gathered, with heaving-lines and lifebuoys.

A wave passed surging down the ship's side, carrying on its crest the head and shoulders of a man. His face was ashen grey, and his hands grabbed ineffectually at the slipping coils of a rope's end thrown from the forecastle. He slid helplessly into the trough of the sea, his eyes wide and terrified, staring at the rows of faces above him.

"'Ere, Fritz," said a rough voice, "'ang on!" and another rope jerked and fell with a splash beside him. Again the clutching hands went out, but his strength was gone. The white face fell forward—

jerked back, gasping and choking—the hands went up.

“Gangway, you fools! He’ll *drown!*” Two able seamen, leaning over the side—one had escaped from a German prison camp six months previously, and was enjoying himself—were thrust apart; a burly figure in socks, and divested of his reefer jacket, steadied himself with one hand on a davit while he measured the distance, and dived.

“Number One!” gasped the incredulous Commander. “Don’t tell me that’s the First Lieutenant?”

“Yessir,” said the Wardroom Steward, who had been passing up ammunition, with a cigarette behind his ear, and a hastily-collected gallery of lady-loves’ photographs projecting from his breast-pocket.

“Yessir.” Adding, as one in the confidence of the Wardroom: “‘Im as lost ’is brother, bombed by them ’Uns. Actin’ regardless, you might say.”

The First Lieutenant, treading water, was effecting a businesslike bowline under the armpits of the drowning man, and avoiding his enfeebled embrace with considerable presence of mind.

Finally the two were hauled inboard and the ship’s company raised a cheer.

“Shut up, will you!” spluttered the First Lieutenant, angrily, wringing the water from his sodden nether garments. He avoided the eye of his Commanding Officer.

The ship’s company, under direction of the Surgeon, applied themselves to first aid with all the

258 An Awfully Big Adventure

enthusiasm of victors and amateurs in the gentle art of saving life. The whaler, laden with dazed and bedraggled captives, was pulling wearily up to the quarter, rising and plunging in the steep seas. The business of the ensuing five minutes brought the Commander and his First Lieutenant face to face.

"Funny little fellow, ain't you?" said the former.

"Bah!" said the Lieutenant. Then added, savagely, "You wait till next time!"

X

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

(1919)

THE Light Cruiser that had shortened-in, whose paying-off pendant hung limp from mainmast-head to quarter-deck, asked permission to proceed.

From her berth in the upper waters of the Firth the Flagship was invisible; but repeating ships and dockyard signal station caught the query, tossed it from one to the other till the Flagship had it, and sent the affirmative signal back to the Light Cruiser as her Captain stepped up the ladder to the bridge.

He walked to the rail that overlooked the fore-castle, caught the eye of the First Lieutenant, and nodded. The latter raised his arm, as one who had received and understood an order. He transmitted it apparently by telepathy, for immediately the last lengths of cable came grinding through the hawse pipe.

The anchor was weighed, the invisible propellers began to eddy the water round the stern, hoists of flags shot from the lockers to the yardarm, said their say, and descended in whirls of colour; yet everywhere was the same scrupulous economy of word and gesture. Officers and men were performing a task—

260 An Awfully Big Adventure

that of getting under weigh—so familiar as to be almost mechanical; yet, conscious that they were carrying it out together for the last time, gave, as it were, a little exhibition of supreme competency, each for his own soul's private satisfaction.

The Captain, looking down on it all from the altitude of the bridge, saw that it was good. It was so good that it gave him a sort of lump in the throat. He knew the Chief Yeoman was watching him, awaiting the word that would send their last signal to the anchored remnant of the fleet ahead. Yet now it came to the moment, he hated the words those gaily coloured flags would spell.

"Odd numbered ships and even numbered ships"—thus you address a fleet—"Good-bye."

He glanced aft and saw the paying-off pendant take the wind of their passage, unfold its sinuous length, and float out into the breeze with the gilded bladder dancing lightly in the smoke above their wake—glanced ahead at their grey "comrades of the mist," lying patiently at anchor awaiting the summons that would bid them also "return in peace to enjoy the blessings of the land"—glanced finally at the Chief Yeoman. . . .

They passed a Battleship at a cable's length, a towering mammoth whose superstructures were alive with men. From somewhere forward a man's voice reached them across the water: "Stand by to give three cheers. . . . Hip! Hip! Hip!" and a great roar of sound breaking like rollers against the hills of

The Parting of the Ways 261

the South Shore, those misty wooded hills whose sameness they had cursed so often through four years of war.

Ship after ship cheered them as they passed. The rows of motionless figures standing stiffly at attention warmed to those cheers. They attributed their obvious gusto to the proud patches on funnels and side, the little Cruiser's battle scars. They were conscious of a clean record in the canteen ashore and on the upland playing-fields, for these things weigh in the quick reckoning of men's hearts at parting. But they were being cheered above all for the paying-off pendant they flew. All the world loves a lover, grateful to this ebullition of nature for reminder and promise alike. To the sailor, however, there is no fairer sight than a ship with 600 feet of white bunting floating astern. It may not be his ship, but it reminds him that his turn will come.

A semaphore waved a parting message from a brother Captain: a cryptic jest that wrinkled the corners of the recipient's eyes; a great man stepped out on to the spacious grandeur of his quarter-deck, and raised his cap with a dignified, half-affectionate gesture of farewell. . . . And then they were sliding under the towering girders of the Forth Bridge.

Southward ho! With the threat of a north-easterly gale on the quarter to speed their heels: south and west for a night and a day, pricking off the familiar names of light vessels amid the steep

262 An Awfully Big Adventure

yellow waves off the east coast; overtaking Channel traffic creeping out to seas where once more no fear was; red ensigns and white dipping in salute and acknowledgment; with the land like a grey shadow on the starboard hand; with war a grey shadow on the memory, fading fast. . . .

Then, at daybreak, chequered forts ahead: cranes and sheerlegs rising out of the mist about the dockyard, distant spires catching the first of the sun. Home!

The Light Cruiser came slowly up harbour in tow of her attendant tugs, like a victor being escorted to his dressing-room by seconds. On all sides syrens hooted vociferously, ships in harbour manned and cheered, and all about the old weather-beaten brick houses by the water's edge was the flutter of flags and handkerchiefs: the welcoming cries of women came faintly across the stream.

By the afternoon the ship was in dock, and neither in the Wardroom nor on the mess deck did men stand upon the order of their going. "Leave!" was in the air: it was echoed in hammer blows on packing-cases, in the bumping of portmanteaux as they were dragged from store-rooms: epitomised perhaps by the Engineer Commander, who danced mid plaudits, solemnly and without grace, on the Wardroom hearthrug.

Entered the Lieutenant, Royal Naval Reserve, and laid his suit case, rug, and gloves upon the settee.

"Weel," he observed, "I'm awa'." The revolv-

The Parting of the Ways 263

ing figure stopped in the midst of a gyration; the onlookers stared: smiles somehow evaporated.

"Going, Jock?" said one blankly. "Going!" echoed the rest. It sounded absurd. The Mess without Jock! The Navy without Jock!

"Aye." The speaker shook hands gravely with the First Lieutenant. "The war's over. . . . Ye'll no' want the R.N.R. any longer. . . ." His smile was a forced one, and a chorus of protests and farewells drowned his next words. They crowded round him, wringing his hand, buffeting his shoulders, recalling in allusions and catchwords the familiar intimacy of all these years of war. By comparison the emotions of yesterday's farewells in the North seemed superficial. *They* would all meet again, somewhere under the White Ensign. . . . But Jock was going; their Jock: dour, tough seaman: incomparable messmate. This was the parting of the ways.

"Back to the Mer-r-chant Service—coals an' bananas. . . . Maybe we'll meet again, though." He made for the door, and there turned as if to survey the mess for the last time. "Eh! But I've had a guid time!" He appeared to search his vocabulary for adequate emphasis.

"A bluidy guid time," he said, and was gone.

XI

UNTO THE HILLS

(1913)

FOR two hours the train from Nice had crossed and recrossed the River Var, as if uncertain which bank it should pursue. The journey had been punctuated by stoppages at innumerable small stations, apparently to enable the engine-driver to discuss politics with the proprietors of adjacent sawmills. The guard took no part in these discussions, but remained aloof—albeit within earshot—until his *confrère* on the engine had scored his point. Then he blew a discordant blast on his horn, the driver climbed triumphantly back on to his engine, and we jolted on to the next political tourney-place.

Where the valley widens the line appeared to make up its mind and to decide definitely for the right bank. The sawmills and patches of Indian corn gave place to orchards and pretty farms; the mountains on either flank of the valley towered to more majestic altitudes. For perhaps the tenth time the brakes screeched, and we came to a standstill beside a deserted platform.

“Touet de Beuil!” said the guard gruffly, coming round to the carriage window. He was a man of few

words, who appeared content to rely on the trumpet for any expression of his views or feelings.

"*Oui, oui!*" he confirmed irritably as I climbed out, slightly incredulous. "*C'est ça—Touet de Beuil—V'là!*" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the mountains which frowned above us; the horn blared forth a shrill note of defiance, and he swung himself on to the departing train.

I looked up to where he had indicated, and there, sure enough, perched crazily among pinnacles and buttresses of rock, was what appeared to be the stronghold of some medieval outlaw. I detected the brown roofs and quaint gables of a hamlet, apparently accessible to none but the eagles, yet boasting in this land of equality and fraternity a railway station of its own.

Footsteps approached me as I stood adjusting the straps of my knapsack, and one of the inhabitants hurried down the lane on to the platform. Childish though it may seem, I was frankly disappointed. The new arrival was a meek-looking little man dressed in black, wearing a bowler hat. In one hand he carried a gingham umbrella, and under his arm a buff-coloured hen of singular imperturbability. Now a brigand may wear a bowler hat; moreover, he may carry a chicken under his arm, and yet preserve an air of outlawry. But to descend from a mountain fastness that belonged by rights to the sixteenth century and brandish an umbrella at a departing train was carrying the incongruous a shade too far.

266 An Awfully Big Adventure

True, he swore roundly, as every good brigand should, at having missed the train. But I could not forgive him his gingham gamp.

A narrow gorge struck off into the mountains, and the path, skirting the torrent that thundered below, wound its way upwards. Limestone cliffs with ferns clinging to precarious footholds rose precipitously on either side, and high up, a thousand feet or more, the tops of trees showed up stark against the blue sky. To the brawling accompaniment of the stream I walked for an hour, when the gorge widened into a rock-strewn valley and I came in sight of an inn. In a rubbish-littered courtyard the proprietress was ministering to a stricken pony that lay buried beneath straw in the shelter of an outhouse: she turned at my approach.

I could lunch there—assuredly. She would prepare an omelette forthwith, and François could wait. François had broken his back somehow, and was, as far as I could gather from the lady's patois and the patient's appearance, in a baddish way.

The sound of our voices brought a travelling bagman to the door. My arrival had evidently interrupted his *déjeûner*, and he courteously postponed its completion to stay in the sun and gossip while mine was being got ready. He was an Italian, and had come from somewhere across the frontier—I forget where—on foot. It was a long way, I remember.

He glanced at my discarded knapsack: "And monsieur is also on the road?" I explained that it

was for pleasure, and his eye lit. "Just so—*che comprende*. And so a man may walk many a long mile, with the sun in his eyes and the wind on his cheek and the noise of running water at his side for company—is it not?" Something of a poet—or at all events a kindred soul, for all he ate garlic "to" his *déjeuner* and his visit to a barber was sadly overdue.

"And monsieur goes to Beuil? It is but fourteen kilometres: I have myself descended from there this morning. To climb Mounier? A brave adventure"—he flourished his wooden toothpick—"when one is strong and young. Yes, the snow lies *au sommet* and the nights are cold *là haut*."

We parted after lunch and I resumed my journey along the slope of the valley. Half an hour later the road forsook the more cultivated ground, and, turning sharp to the left, commenced a series of zigzags up the steep side of the cliff. Here the limestone ceased suddenly, and the red rock proper of the Gorge du Cians commenced. It was a dull, deep red, the shade of Egyptian porphyry, and the line of demarcation between it and the limestone of the valley curiously distinct. At the final turn of the path I entered the gorge, and there, where an ancient Roman watch-tower still stood, I turned for a last look down the valley. The sun was gilding the russet autumn foliage, and the poplars along the river-bed stood up like slender golden spires. The fig and cypress still held to their brave, hard green, but elsewhere the

268 **An Awfully Big Adventure**

vegetation rioted through every shade of brown and yellow. The white road wound away like a thread to the southward, and far off among the trees a curl of smoke showed the inn where I had lunched. It was the second stage of the journey accomplished, and already I had experienced the regrets of a parting, for the Italian bagman with his vile French and muddy gaiters, the companion of a moment, was one who understood the call of

“A shadowy highway cool and brown,
Alluring up and enticing down.”

The Gorge du Cians is a great cleft in the rock, with precipitous sides. The road is cut out of the rock itself and climbs bravely, with the river thundering along three or four hundred feet below it, and the cliffs towering a thousand feet above. It is a versatile road, too: no two hundred yards are straight, and occasionally it goes to earth and tunnels beneath an outflung buttress. In places the gorge is so steep that no vegetation but moss and lichen can cling to its sides. At others it leans back to make a lap, as children say, for a wilderness of trees and some copper-coloured shrub like a Canadian maple. Once it narrowed overhead to a few feet, a mere crevice in the mountains.

Tiny streams trickled down to join the parent stream below, and presently I came to a spot where a veritable cascade poured on to the road from an overhanging ledge. I ran the gauntlet of this crystal

shower, and sat awhile to listen to the voices of the gorge. The scent of damp earth and wet greenery, the murmur of the stream below, and a thousand tricklings and plashings, played their part in the sylvan melody. Somewhere surely along this path I should turn a corner and encounter Pan, or view him afar off among the tree-boles where the sunbeams wheeled to mark the passing hours! But I only met, as the afternoon wore on, an old man driving a donkey laden with faggots; though once (I admit with a momentary quickening of the heart) I did see a goat, horned and venerable of aspect, silhouetted against the pale sky.

The afternoon shadows crept higher up the wooded slopes; the air got cooler as I progressed, and when I emerged from the gorge a chilly wind sprang up. The sun dipped out of sight and the broad valley took on a more sombre tint. Here for the first time I encountered the pines, and in place of the red rock of the gorge, sad-coloured limestone appeared between the foliage. Then it was I realised that the wine-red earth and rock had all the while been reminding me of my own Devon, and felt suddenly homesick.

An occasional woodcutter's hut appeared in a clearing among the trees, and once or twice I overtook workers returning to the village; but it was not until an hour later that I turned a shoulder of the mountains and saw my destination. It was the quaintest jumble of brown roofs and gables, clinging

270 An Awfully Big Adventure

for all the world like a colony of swallows' nests to the end of a sort of promontory that projected into the valley. No two lines about it were parallel, and behind, where the ground rose steeply towards the encircling mountains, towered Mount Mounier, snow-capped and ghostly in the twilight. The road wound round to the base of the promontory and entered the village at the farther end. But by following a rocky path I scaled the steeper side, and reached the main street through a labyrinth of steps and alleys as the vesper-bell of the little church stopped ringing. An inn, a wineshop, the church, and a general dealer's were the outstanding features of the hamlet. The rest of the buildings (to the number of perhaps a couple of score) were grouped haphazard around them. Few lights were showing, and I only saw one person, a woman, who was singing some plaintive lullaby at her doorstep.

An old man at the inn showed me to my room, and while he prepared dinner I strolled out towards a knoll of ground behind the village where a crucifix stood. The woman who had been singing had gone indoors, leaving the night curiously silent. The wind had dropped: a full moon struggled above the fringe of firs, and the shadow of the crucifix took a more definite outline across the turf, where the hoarfrost was already glimmering. In the utter stillness I heard one sound, the tinkle of a sheep bell far off across the valley, and holding my breath to listen

better, was aware of the ticking of the watch upon my wrist.

Here it was the village priest joined me. He had concluded vespers, and was taking his evening stroll.

"And monsieur has come all this way to climb Mounier? If the question is permitted, whom has he selected as a guide?"

I explained that I proposed going alone, and he shrugged his shoulders, nodding his head a little. Presently he lit the cigarette I had proffered, and in the flare of the match considered me with grave brown eyes.

"You are young, my son, and when one is young one must needs climb alone, *n'est ce pas?* One seeks the adventure—the brave adventure. . . ." He sighed. "Then the heart of monsieur must be sound and his sinews strong. But once there, I am told the view is superb, and there is a hunter living near the top who will give you a meal at a moderate charge. The path is not difficult—when one is young and the heart sound. . . ."

* * * * *

"*Cinq heures du matin, monsieur!*" The old man, who combined the duties of cook, waiter, chambermaid, and *maître-d'hôtel*, hammered at my door, and I awoke. A thin coating of ice had spread over the water in my jug, and through the open window the stars still shone with frosty brilliance. By

272 An Awfully Big Adventure

the time I had finished a bowl of chocolate and stood outside in football "shorts," nailed boots, and sweater, the first hint of dawn was creeping over the edge of the hills.

Early as it was, a sleepy teamster was yoking up his horses outside and stamping on the road to warm his feet. I could see the summit of Mount Mounier, 9,000 feet above the level of the sea I had left but the day before. But there remained another 5,000 feet to climb, and 9,000 to descend ere I earned my bed that night. So with a "Good morning!" to the carter (who regarded it out of place and superfluous) I set forth.

The going was easy enough, and I simply steered for the snow-cap. For the first hour or so I crossed cultivated ground, which gave place to turf, cropped like an English lawn by sheep and goats, and finally to rough shale and boulders. The sun rose before I was high enough to see more than the sudden flush on a few isolated snow-capped peaks, but as I climbed steadily the whole panorama unfolded, and the rounded foothills, with their fir-clad slopes and glens, the village of Beuil, the valley up which I had come the day before, all dropped back into insignificance. By eight o'clock I had reached the snow, and could detect far above me a tiny speck where the huntsman's dwelling was. An hour later, and I heard the unmistakable bark of a dog.

A few wearisome zigzag paths, a struggle up some steps cut in the frozen snow, and I was greeted by a

gaunt deer-hound, who sniffed round me and slobbered at my hands. A man came out of a two-roomed shanty of pine-logs and turf. He was cleaning a muzzle-loading gun, and put it down to meet me with extended hand.

"Tu as bien grimpé, m'n ami!" As we shook hands he placed his disengaged one over my heart with the air of a Harley Street specialist and nodded, smiling. *"Je t'ai vu, depuis sept heures. . . . Oui, tu as bien grimpé. C'est un cœur fort."* He was a wiry little man of about fifty, with a wrinkled face, burnt madder-brown by exposure to the sun and wind, a pair of hawk-like eyes, and an aquiline nose. In fact, altogether he looked very like a hawk.

"Mais il faut monter juste au sommet, et après cela le déjeuner, n'est ce pas?" I had not in fact reached the top. A saddle of rock stretched away up another 300 feet to the actual peak, and after a drink of ice-cold water I commenced the final ascent.

A cairn of stones marks the summit of Mount Mounier—a feature not uncommon to the tops of mountains. I sat there, as it were, on a pinnacle, in a stupendous amphitheatre of mountains. The horizon was mountains, the foreground mountains, range upon range, peak after snow-clad peak, stabbing the cloudless sky. The valleys were full of shadows, violet in the depths, claret-coloured—the very tint of lees of wine—as they neared the sunlight. And as

274 An Awfully Big Adventure

the sun rose higher a distant peak would flush rose-pink and pale again. A little wind came from over the edge of the world, the scented messenger of far-distant pine-trees, and passed whispering to another peak ten miles away.

I sat for quite a while musing, as might the gods upon Olympus, over the littleness of man and his affairs; and in truth, with my chin on a level with this majestic array of Nature's grandeur, some aloofness of spirit was pardonable. In the middle of my Jove-like meditations, however, I saw the figure of my host, 300 feet below, gesticulating.

"But, the omelette . . ." he protested, when I descended. As I ate and drank he bustled about the hut, voluble in a queer clipped patois; a gossip, removed by choice or destiny 5,000 feet above his fellows, to live in company with his dog in this hut. I looked round it for some clue to his pursuits: a couple of ice-axes and some coils of rope behind the door; a pair of skis in a corner; a shelf for crockery, with a powder-flask and a rosary hanging from a nail. A bed, a table and chair, a charcoal stove, and a few cooking implements: that was all.

After I had finished eating he led me outside, and, pointing with a gnarled forefinger, named one by one the peaks in view. He spoke of them familiarly—as one who refers to constant and intimate companions, but once or twice I had to shake my head in despair. There might have been a wedge-shaped opal-tinted shadow on the far-off haze, but I could

not confess to more. The little hawk-eyed man chuckled indulgently.

"Peut-être bien, peut-être bien. Mais j'ai l'habitude, moi." Generously put, but I felt that I had failed in this supreme test, and it was significant that he no longer *tutoyait* as at his first rapturous greeting.

An hour and a half later, as I was nearing the expanse of turf on my downward journey, I encountered an ancient of days leading a charcoal-laden donkey : to be more exact, the donkey appeared to be leading him. The three of us halted to exchange amenities, and I proffered the old man a cigar which remained in the bottom of my wallet. The ancient took it readily enough, then looked searchingly round as if we were a pair of conspirators in a drama. I was about to inquire the reason for these precautions when he laid a forefinger to his nose, and half-closing one rheumy eye, whispered huskily :

"Vous êtes contrebandier—oui?"

Twenty-four hours earlier I should have repudiated the suggestion. But after my communing with mountains, and the great solitude of the snows, one man's occupation seemed as good as another's. After all, it is not easy to give pleasure to one's fellows, and if it added flavour to the tobacco to suggest it had been smuggled from over the frontier, then a smuggler I would be.

I nodded darkly, and we shook hands. With very little encouragement I think he would have em-

276 An Awfully Big Adventure

braced me. "An adventurous life!" wheezed the hoary sinner as we parted; "ah, but one of brave adventure!"

It was curious how the phrase recurred. First the bagman, then the village priest at Beuil, and now this withered *charbonnier*. I reached the village (the clock was striking noon) inclined to wonder whether, after all, I was the dull dog I had hitherto decided myself to be. But be it here recorded that this transient doubt I have since ascribed to the mountain air.

Already the hours were forging afresh the links that bound me to the sea, and soon after six I climbed wearily into the train for Nice. The compartment was crowded: nevertheless, at a little station lower down the Var valley, the door opened to admit four new-comers. Votaries of "*La Chasse*" returning from a day's shooting. They combined a varied taste in sporting attire with a fine disregard for the precautions usually observed by bearers of lethal weapons. One in particular, who had omitted to uncock his gun, held it so that the muzzle wavered between the pit of my stomach and his companion's ear. It may not have been loaded, but I was too tired to investigate or expostulate. Shot by shot, mile by mile, they lived through their day again, while the carriage applauded, commiserated, and hung breathless over the tale of prowess. The bag contained one greenfinch. Yet it needed but a glance at the principal narrator's flashing eye and vivid

gestures to realise that none but the most exacting will judge the day by its material result.

I had not even a greenfinch to show, yet I doubt not that the five of us went to bed that night equally aglow with a sense of "the brave adventure." And when all is said and done, life would smack of the heroic often enough were but our audience a little more appreciative and the stage less cramped.

PRINTED BY
CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED, LA BELLE SAUVAGE.
LONDON. E.C.4
F.120.819



THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW

AN INITIAL FINE OF 25 CENTS
WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FAILURE TO RETURN
THIS BOOK ON THE DATE DUE. THE PENALTY
WILL INCREASE TO 50 CENTS ON THE FOURTH
DAY AND TO \$1.00 ON THE SEVENTH DAY
OVERDUE.

FEB 13 1933

APR 18 1942

17 May '63 BC

REC'D LD

MAY 12 1963

119
11 1C
1549
428492

Ricci

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

L

